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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1965 Vol. 16, No. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

CRUISE FOR MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

He was a scoundrel of great wealth who manipulated human beings with the cold detachment of a diabolical puppet master. And that made Shayne very angry indeed.

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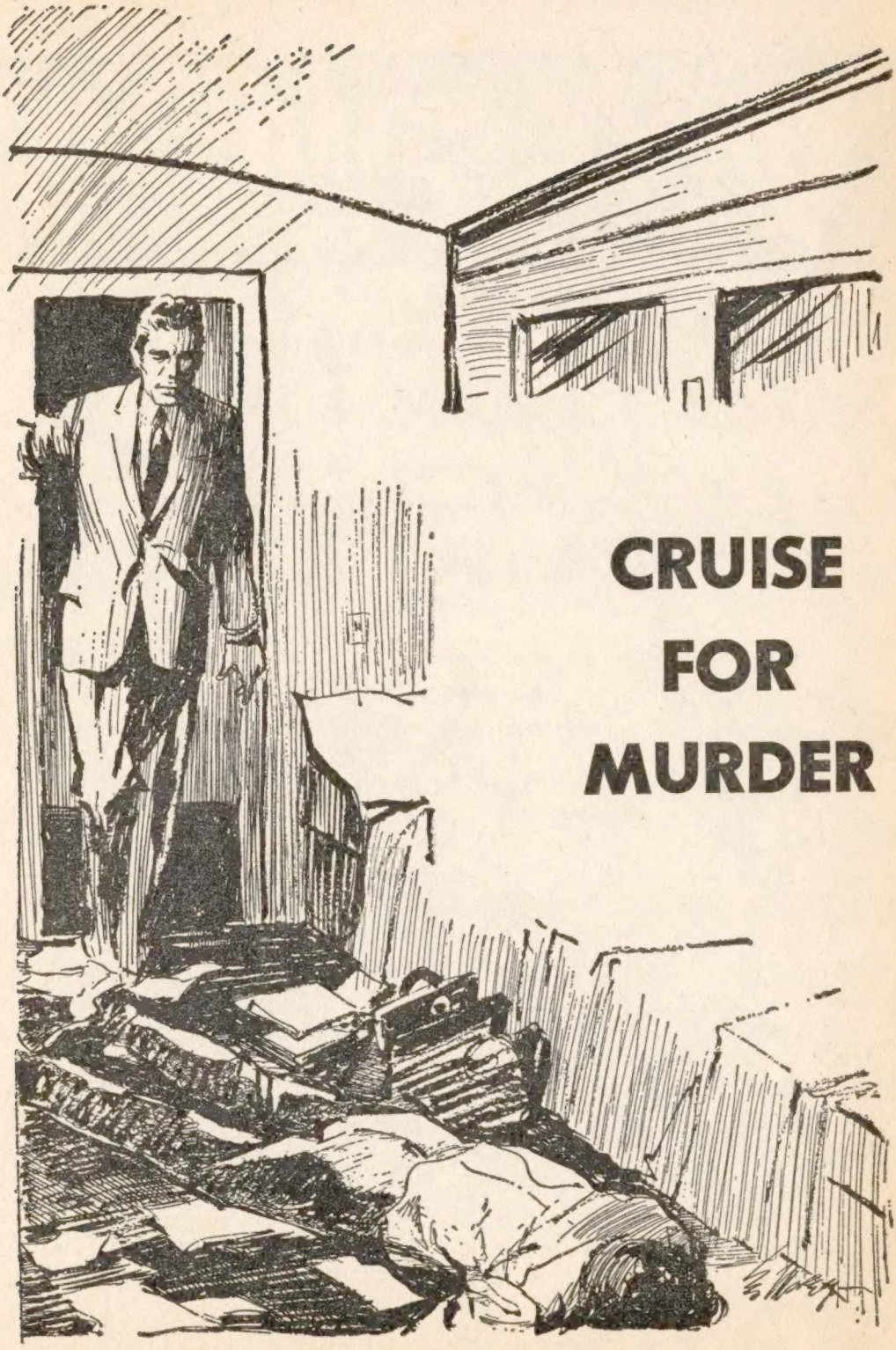

CRUISE FOR MURDER

Even a man in desperate financial need may find parting with a family heirloom intolerable. But could that alone, Shayne wondered, open the floodgates to murder?

THE NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

by Brett Halliday

MIKE SHAYNE always awakened early on a train. But this time it was the noise that roused him from slumber. He lay rigid and alert in his berth. He could hear the steady sound of the wheels and the almost continuous creaking of the fast express as it sped over the tracks. But it was a different sound that had brought him wide awake in the vibrating berth, and widened his eyes in startlement.

Shayne listened intently, but the sound did not come again. It was the kind of sound that might have been made by something heavy falling in the next compartment. Now all he could hear were the steady noises of the moving train. The light of the sun outside his window told him that they were probably somewhere just south of Philadelphia. His watch confirmed this. It read 8:15 in the morning. Montagu Black had been going to call him for breakfast at eight exactly. And Black

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was in the adjoining compartment.

The detective threw off the covers and stepped from his berth. He bent down to check the small briefcase. The briefcase was still there, and the box hadn't been removed. He opened the box, and stared with relief at the large diamond shining with its own inner fire. Its old-fashioned setting stood out conspicuously against the blue-velvet lining of the box.

Satisfied, Shayne closed the box, and returned it to the briefcase. Then he re-locked the briefcase, grasped it firmly by the handle and stepped to the connecting door between the two compartments.

The connecting door was locked!

With a quick tug on his left earlobe, Shayne turned on his heel and stepped to the door of his compartment that led out into the corridor of the Boston to Washington train. The door between his compartment and Montagu Black's compartment had been unlocked when Shayne had gone to bed.

Now it was locked, and Shayne stepped swiftly down the corridor to the outer door of Black's compartment. He drew his automatic from its shoulder holster and tried the doorknob.

This door was unlocked!

Shayne pushed the door open sharply and stepped into the compartment, his automatic ready.

The first thing he saw was that the compartment had been completely ransacked. From the look of it the searcher had used a fine-toothed comb, neatly and expertly. The search could not have been made in a few seconds, and yet Shayne had not been awakened by the search itself.

Tugging hard on his earlobe, the big redhead had to admire anyone who could search a train compartment this thoroughly without making enough noise to awaken a sleeping man in the next compartment. What had probably finally awakened Shayne was the second thing he saw.

Montagu Black lay unconscious on the floor. The small, balding stockbroker was sprawled out on his face amid three plush-covered pillows, a crumpled suit still attached to a hanger, and an over-turned smoking stand. Shayne holstered his automatic and bent over the unconscious man.

There were no marks on Black. The stockbroker was still alive. Shayne sniffed the air. There was no mistaking the odor that came to his nostrils—chloroform. Black would not regain consciousness for some time.

Shayne stood up and his steely grey eyes studied the compartment again. From the open area on the bed, it was obvious that Black had probably been chloro-

formed and laid on the bed. The stockbroker had then rolled off and onto the floor, causing the sound which Mike Shayne had heard.

The detective stepped over the fallen Black and tested the door that connected with his own compartment. It had been locked on this side as he had expected. He turned to look again at the unconscious man.

He took out a cigarette and lighted it slowly and deliberately. It looked now that there was little doubt but that Montagu Black had been right. Someone did wnat Black's priceless family diamond very much.

Shayne bent down again to try to revive the stockbroker, but his mind was going back over every detail of the job that had led up to this first real attempt to steal the diamond.

II

THE TELEPHONE CALL from Boston had come just after Mike Shayne had arrived in his office. His pert, brown-eyed secretary, Lucy Hamilton, had buzzed and announced the call from Mr. Montagu Black from Boston.

"Shayne speaking," the redhead had said into the receiver.

The voice on the other end had been polite, cultured, with a faint trace of aristocratic arrogance.

"Mr. Shayne?" the voice said.

"My name is Montagu Black. I have need of your services."

"Don't they have private detectives in Boston?" Shayne said drily.

"Many, I'm sure," Black answered evenly. "However, I have reason to think I am being watched. I do not trust the man I am dealing with, and would prefer an unfamiliar face. In addition, Mr. Shayne, your name was given to me by a friend."

"What friend?" Shayne snapped.

"George Daley," Black told him. "As a matter of fact, it was George's idea that I hire a private detective."

Although he was alone in his

Miami office, Shayne nodded. George Daley was a lawyer in the Crime Commission office in Boston. Shayne both knew and liked Daley. The Bostonian often came down to Maimi for the bonefish angling. Daley would not toss Shayne's name around lightly.

"You know George Daley well, Mr. Black?" Shayne asked.

"He's a distant cousin, Mr. Shayne. I can almost believe everyone is related to everyone else up here in Boston."

"All right, what's your story?"

Montague Black chose to ignore Shayne's brusqueness. He was explicit and to the point. "I am a stockbroker, Mr. Shayne, and I have made some mistakes recently. I need cash. I own a diamond, a rather large stone. It has been in my family a long time and I am reluctant to part with it. But the price is such I have no choice. I agreed to sell.

"Since then strange things have been happening here. I am sure I am being watched, even followed. The diamond is usually in my safe deposit box in the bank vault, but, naturally, I have it with me now, since I am selling it. I'm afraid someone has found out that I have it. Only yesterday my car was broken into. I am sure that someone attempted to enter my house last night, and only the unexpected arrival of my wife scared them off.

"In short, I am worried that someone is trying to steal the stone, and I need a professional to act as my bodyguard until I can deliver it. You see, Mr. Shayne, the buyer, one J. Phillips Manley, insists that I bring the stone to him to complete the transaction. He wants me to bring it personally to his yacht and join him for a cruise after the sale. We are more-or-less friends, and I can't very well refuse. I don't want to alarm him about possible thieves."

Shayne had listened to the story with a certain impatience. "Where is this yacht of Manley's?"

"Sailing up the Atlantic Coast," Black said. "Manely loves his yacht, and he flatly refuses to leave it if he can help it. He is a very strange man, Mr. Shayne. He conducts much of his business from the ship. It is a big yacht."

"He expects you to deliver a diamond to a yacht at sea?"

"No, tomorrow the yacht will be in Chesapeake Bay," Black said. "I am to join it at Cambridge, Maryland. That is two hours drive from Baltimore, Mr. Shayne, and the Eastern Shore tends to be isolated. There is only a small, private air-taxi service into Cambridge, and I do not fly. I will be going down on the train from Boston, and I would like you to be with me."

"It isn't the kind of work I usually do, Mr. Black," Shayne said.

"George Daley told me, but I

simply don't know anyone else. The stone is very valuable, and I am afraid they might resort to violence. In addition, I simply do not trust Manley; he is very eccentric. I hesitate to go alone."

"Why sell to this Manley? There must be other more reliable buyers?" Shayne said.

"As I said, Manley is eccentric. He has offered one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a stone worth perhaps twenty-five thousand less than that sum. I can't turn it down, and I must do it Manley's way or not at all. I would not put it past Manley to have the stone stolen himself. I have insisted on a certified check, but much can happen before the sale."

Black's story was simple enough—if J. Phillips Manley was as eccentric as Black said. Rich men rarely paid more than something was worth—usually less—which was how they became rich.

"I'll call you back, Mr. Black," Shayne said.

"Very well, Mr. Shayne. But please be prompt, I need you in Boston this evening. The train leaves at midnight. I will arrange adjoining compartments."

When Black hung up, Shayne immediately had Lucy call George Daley in Boston. Daley was pleased to hear from Shayne. The Bostonian confirmed most of Black's story.

"Yes, Mike, I told Montagu to call you. He's had a lot of trouble in the market, and his wife is a spender. He apparently must sell the diamond. He came to me with his story, wanted some help. I can't ask the Commissioner to assign police as a personal favor without more to go on. So I suggested a private detective. You're the best I know."

"Thanks, George, but it's not really in my line," Shayne said.

"Not usually, I admit," Daley said from the other end of the line, "but the way Manley wants this handled makes it damned odd and dangerous. I wouldn't like Black to go alone."

"Your friend Manley sounds strange, all right," Shayne said.

There was a grim laugh on the far end of the line. "If he wasn't so rich, Mike, he'd be labeled psychotic, I think. The man's a monster, really. He hardly ever leaves that yacht of his. He has a young wife he treats outrageously. I think he's only buying the diamond because he knows it will hurt Black so much to have to sell it. He's capable of anything. He's been playing games with Black's wife for years, and he knows Black hates him. So he makes a ridculous offer Black *has* to accept. Then he makes him deliver the stone like some messenger boy."

"He sounds like a first class heel," Shayne said.

"He's pretty hard to believe, Mike," Daley said, "and Helen

Black isn't much better. She's bled Black dry, and laughs at him. She'd do anything for money, and Manley has money."

"What about this diamond?"

"It's not too well-known, Mike, but it's been in the Black family since a seafaring Captain Black stole it from some Malayan idol back in the sailing ship days. It's worth about one hundred thousand, perhaps a little more. Manley is paying an exorbitant sum for it. I don't like the whole deal, Mike. If I could do it, I'd send one of our detectives."

"All right, George," Shayne said. "I'll help Black out."

Shayne caught the next jet north to meet the anxious Montagu Black in Boston. They had a late dinner, with the briefcase resting between them, and caught the 11:50 sleeper for New York and points south to Washington. Shayne kept the briefcase himself. That proved to be a lucky decision. As lucky a decision as the two compartments. If they had been in the same compartment, Shayne could easily have been on the floor with unconscious Montagu Black.

III

MONTAGU BLACK opened his eyes. The stockbroker's eyes were misty and filmed, and as he tried to struggle up he groaned and lay back.

"Take it easy," Shayne said. "You've been chloroformed."

Black blinked, and shook his head to clear it. His usually cultured voice was a hoarse croak.

"The—diamond! Did they—"

"Never came near me," Shayne said. "They must have been sure you had it. You want to tell me what happened?"

Black nodded again, and sat up. This time the broker made it. He leaned back against his bunk and lighted a cigarette with shaky hands.

"There must have been two of them. It was just getting light. There was this knock on the door, and a voice that sounded like the porter said I had a telegram. I guess I was stupid. But I know Manley likes to send telegrams, so I opened the door. I was very careful. I only opened it a crack and reached out for the telegram. The second man must have been hiding against the wall. He grabbed my arm and they pulled me out and put a cloth over my face. That's all I remember."

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe.

"They pulled you out into the corridor," Shayne said. "That's why I didn't hear anything, I suppose. It doesn't make sense that they didn't search my compartment after drawing a complete blank in yours."

"It *is* strange," Black agreed. "Unless they haven't connected

us yet. That's why I wanted someone from out of Boston."

Shayne said thoughtfully, "They must have at least suspected we were traveling together. They locked the door between our compartments, which means they knew the door was unlocked."

"Very true," Black agreed. "I wonder what did stop them from trying you? Perhaps they heard you move around."

Shayne was still looking thoughtful. His steely grey eyes were studying the connecting door that had been locked. Black said that he had been attacked just as it was getting light. That would have given the intruders almost an hour and a half to search the compartment before Black rolled to the floor and made the noise which had awakened Shayne.

It was a long time, but they had searched slowly and silently. It was possible that it had taken them that long. It was also possible that they had really not made the connection between Shayne and Black.

"Well, they didn't get the diamond," Shayne said grimly, patting the briefcase he was still holding. "I don't think they'll try again on the train; we're almost to Baltimore anyway. What do you say to some breakfast?"

"Good," Black said. "Let me just freshen up. I'll meet you in the dining car."

Mike Shayne was right. Nothing else happened before they reached Baltimore, although Shayne kept his eyes open and his jacket unbuttoned just in case. After Black joined him, washed and shaved and looking none the worse for his experience, Shayne ate his breakfast and watched the passing landscape.

They crossed the head of Chesapeake Bay near Havre de Grace, and all the way into Baltimore the countryside was more than half water with the endless rivers, bays and inlets of Chesapeake Bay. Baltimore itself was heralded by a long series of smoking dumps and junkyards all along the tracks before the city.

Shayne led the way down from the train to the platform, and up the escalator into the station itself. The Baltimore station was grim and dingy, with a pin-ball arcade at one end, and the lobby at the other. The entrance lobby was intended to look elegant, but was now cheap and grey. The station was small.

They quickly passed through to where the yellow cabs came in. Black had hired a car to be waiting for them there. Shayne saw the car almost at once. And he saw something else at the same instant.

A woman was walking straight toward him and Black. She carried a small, grey suitacase. She was tall, blonde and more than

beautiful. There was no mistaking the fact that she was headed straight for them. Shayne unbuttoned his jacket and set the briefcase carefully on the ground. He turned to warn Black.

Montagu Black had paled slightly. The stockbroker was staring at the woman.

"Hello, Monty dear," she said, her eyes passing quickly from Black to Shayne. "I thought the train would never get here. It's more than a half hour late."

"How did *you* get here!" Black said, his voice low and angry.

"By jet, darling—so much faster than your messy old trains."

"You know what I mean, damn it!" Black almost shouted. "What the devil are you doing down here?"

The woman laughed. "After you left J.P. called and said it was a criminal shame to leave little me home when he had all that space on his yacht. So he invited me to fly down and join the party. Here I am. And now do I meet your fascinating-looking friend?"

Black turned to Shayne. "Shayne, this is my wife Helen. She was supposed to be at home, but apparently the great J. Phillips Manley decided he'd like to have her along, and the customer is always right. Isn't that so?"

"Well, you didn't tell me that after business there was going to be a party trip," Helen Black said. "It serves you right, you should have told me it was a cruise, and that Mr. Shayne would be here." She smiled. "If J. P. doesn't eat him alive, I will!"

"You're here now, Black said shortly. "We might as well get moving."

Black took the wheel of the new Chrysler he had rented. Helen Black sat beside her husband, and Shayne sat beside the woman. To sit between them had been Helen Black's idea, and the redhead did not find this at all unpleasant.

The car that pulled out behind them the moment they left the station, was much more unpleasant. It was a small red convertible. They were soon more than ten miles out of Baltimore toward the Bay Bridge, but the red car continued to trail them.

IV

THE RED CAR was clearly visible in the rear-view mirror, and Shayne watched it moving steadily behind them. Helen Black, chattered on, oblivious to Shayne's preoccupation or her husband's silence.

"Manley always has such lovely parties," she said. "He spends so much money on them. Poor Monty here really hates money. It's his Boston background. Can you imagine, he's had that diamond trinket all these years and I never realized how much it was worth."

Shayne continued to watch the red convertible. They were through Glen Burnie and approaching the fork where the traffic divided almost equally between that going to Annapolis and south, and that going to the Bay Bridge and the Eastern Shore.

The red convertible followed them down the left fork toward the Bay Bridge.

"Black," Shayne said. "I'm pretty sure we're being followed. That red convertible pulled out of the Baltimore station right after us, and it's still there."

Helen Black laughed. "A lot of people drive from the Baltimore station to the Eastern Shore."

"Can you get his license?" Black said, ignoring his wife.

"No, it's on the rear," Shayne said. "But there's a way to make sure. Turn off at the next exit from this highway."

Black nodded. It was almost a mile before the first exit. Black waited until the last minute, and then swerved sharply into the side road and stepped on the accelerator. The big Chrysler shot down the side road until it went around a curve and was hidden from the highway.

Black braked, turned the steering wheel rapidly, and the car squealed into an even smaller side road. Black stopped the car. Shayne turned to watch the road they had just left.

Black lighted another cigarette.

They waited. After a time Helen Black began to laugh again. No red convertible came past where they were hidden.

"Cops and robbers," Helen Black said. "What *will* you boys think of playing next? Manley probably arranged this for a joke."

"False alarm?" Black said to Shayne.

"It looks like it," Shayne said. "We better start back to the highway."

Mike Shayne sat back as Black drove out onto the side road and turned back for the highway. The redhead was not at all sure it had been a false alarm. The men who had searched Black's compartment had been as silent and expert as ghosts. And the red car had been following them very closely.

When they reached the highway again, Shayne seemed to be

relaxed and oblivious to the countryside as they drove on to the giant Bay Bridge and across its five mile expanse high above Chesapeake Bay. But his grey eyes were alert.

In the distance to the left Shayne saw a cluster of fishing boats where the striped bass must be schooling close to the surface. To the right the wide reaches of the Bay lay shining in the mid-morning sun. As far as he could see there was no other way to cross the shining expanse of water except this towering silver bridge.

Shayne let his eyes drift up to the rear-view mirror as they exited from the bridge on the Eastern Shore side. He did not have long to wait.

Less than a mile beyond the bridge, the red convertible was suddenly behind them again. Shayne said nothing this time. There was no other highway from Baltimore to Cambridge, and the red convertible could have simply guessed that their destination was somewhere on the Eastern Shore. It was possible. But there was a much simpler and more logical answer—somehow the driver of the red convertible knew where they were going.

It was almost exactly noon when they reached Cambridge and crossed the tidal inlet of the Choptank River into the town. The red convertible was still behind them. But as they turned toward the Yacht Club marina where they were to be picked up, the red convertible continued on into the center of town. The Chrysler pulled up at the marina, and a fat man of average height stood smiling at them.

"Well, well, Montagu," the fat man said. "I see you found our Helen. Aren't you glad I invited her for you?"

"Of course, J.P." Black said.

"Of course you are," J. Phillips Manley said, and began to roar with laughter.

The wealthy yachtsman was an immense man with a round, almost cherubic face. His shoulders were massive and his great belly shook when he laughed.

Helen Black jumped from the car and ran to embrace him. Montagu Black stood there in silence, but Shayne could see the dark anger gathering on the broker's face.

"Well, shall we get aboard?" Manley said. "The others are waiting for us. You'll be Mr. Shayne, from the insurance company?"

"Yes," Shayne said shortly. It was the cover he and Black had agreed to use to explain his presence.

As they all walked along the dock to the launch that would take them out to the yacht, Shayne noticed two things. In front of him J. Phillips Manley had his arm around Helen Black as they

stepped down into the launch. Behind him, as he turned for one last check, Shayne saw the red convertible.

A young man had stepped out of the red car and was walking toward the parked Chrysler. When he saw Shayne watching him, he spun on his heel and walked quickly back toward his own car.

Shayne went on along the dock and down into the launch. The detective's face was a study in frowning thought as he sat down in the stern seat.

V

J. PHILLIPS MANLEY'S yacht was 240 feet of pure splendor. From its sleek lines to its shining decks and polished hardwood rails, it was built like a luxury craft from a by-gone age rather than in the more modern power-boat style.

"They had been using her as a fishing boat," Manley explained to Shayne as he led the way into the large forward salon. "I bought her dirt cheap. I put a few hundred thousand dollars into re-doing her, and now I've got the best yacht afloat. Maybe Onassis can top it, but no one else."

"It looks big enough to carry an army," Shayne said drily.

"Ten cabins. Four on this main deck, and six below," Manley said. "Not counting the crew's quarters, and I have ten men in the crew, plus two cooks and three waiters."

"Impressive," Shayne said, "but I think we should get down to business, so I can be on my way."

Manley laughed. "You insurance types, always in a hurry. But I'm afraid you'll just have to be patient."

"What?" Montagu Black snapped. "Can't we conclude the deal now, J.P.?"

"My appraiser isn't aboard yet, nor all my guests," Manley said evenly. "I'm a careful man, Monty—nothing personal."

"I don't care a damn about an appraiser. In fact I'm glad you have one. But I want to get the stone off my hands. Besides, Mr. Shayne is a busy man. He plans to drive back to Baltimore at once."

"We'll take good care of Mr. Shayne," Manley said. "But for now, both your cabins are ready below. You can freshen up, and join me for drinks in the salon. By that time we should be ready to conclude our business, eh?"

J. Phillips Manley looked like a man who was accustomed to having his way, and Mike Shayne saw no point in protesting. He could understand Black's anxiety, though. As long as the stone was on the yacht another attempt could be made to steal it, and Black wanted it off his hands.

Shayne was anxious to return to

Miami, but there was little he could do until the diamond actually passed into Manley's possession. He shrugged and followed Black below.

The cabin was large and sunny with two open portholes facing the far shore of the Choptank River. As he washed up and shaved, Shayne thought about the red convertible. There was something just a little odd about doing a tail-job in a red convertible. And what was the young, sporty-looking man doing near the hired Chrysler? Why risk being seen taking an interest in an empty car?

There was something incongruous about the amateurishness of the red convertible, combined with the smooth and expert operation on the train that morning. There was also a lot more than met the eye to the presence of Helen Black. Manley obviously enjoyed having Helen Black as a guest, and Montagu Black just as obviously didn't like it at all.

Shayne was still thinking about these peculiarities, and had just finished shaving, when he glanced out the nearest porthold. The yacht was moving. It was moving fast, and the far shore was already distant. Shayne swore softly. He had heard no other launch arrive.

Obviously, Manley had been lying. The tycoon was not waiting for anyone else. Quickly, Shayne dressed in a pair of khaki trousers and a blue jacket he had brought in case he had time for some fishing. As he left his cabin, carrying the briefcase, he met Black hurrying up to the deck.

"Damn it, we're underway!" Black said. "Come on."

Shayne followed the angry stockbroker up to the deck, and along the open deck to the forward salon. J. Phillips Manley sat in the salon grinning at them. Five other people looked up as Shayne and Black came in. The yacht was already moving up and down to the swell of the open Bay.

"What the devil are you doing, J.P.?" Black demanded.

"A little kidnapping, Manley?" Shayne said.

Manley smiled. "At sea we call it 'shanghaing,' Mr. Shayne."

The fat man sat at his ease in a high nautical swivel chair. The chair commanded the full view forward through a wide expanse of glass that formed the front of the salon. Manley could swivel the chair to look in any direction.

He turned the chair to face Mike Shayne and Montagu Black, the unbroken expanse of Chesapeake Bay behind him beyond the bow of the yacht. The chair raised the tycoon above everyone else in the salon.

"Call me an eccentric, Mr. Shayne," Manley said. "I don't like people to leave my hospitality until I know I have impressed them. Tonight we will have dinner on a fabulous island near here.

and tomorrow we will cruise to the Western Shore where you can leave if you like. A cruise, dinner, and good company in comfortable quarters. Not an unpleasant prospect, surely?"

"And if I want to go ashore right now?" Shayne said.

"You would offend me deeply," Manley said. "Besides, you would have to be a remarkable swimmer, not to mention a good walker."

"Damn it, J.P.," Black cried, "Shayne has to drive the car back to Baltimore. We arranged it that way, and he can't wait around here just to suit you. Now let's finish the deal, and you can put Shayne ashore."

"The car is half way back to Baltimore, Monty," Manley said. "I took the liberty of having one of my men drive it back. When we reach port tomorrow, I'll arrange to get Mr. Shayne wherever he wishes to go. Now shall we stop talking business, and enjoy ourselves."

"Do I have a choice?" Shayne said.

"None," Manley said.

"Then make it a double cognac, water on the side," Shayne said.

"Good," Manley said, nodding to the hovering waiter. "And I want you to meet your fellow prisoners. My wife especially, eh, Charlotte?"

Shayne turned to look at the small, dark woman who sat alone as far from Manley as it was possible to get. Charlotte Manley was little more than a girl, and as young and slender as her husband was old and fat.

Shayne had started to smile to the woman when he saw the boat through the expanse of glass that enclosed the salon. It was bobbing heavily just off the port bow of the yacht—a small power boat of the type used in the area for sport fishing. It had no cabin, and the man standing alone at its tiller was the same young man who had stepped out of the red convertible back at the Cambridge marina.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE stared out at the small boat until the yacht had passed it. Just before it passed from sight, Shayne had the definite impression that the young man had bent to start his engines going full speed. He saw no more, and he realized that Manley was still talking.

"As you can see, my wife is younger than I am. But that never stopped true love, did it, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne faced the fat man. "No, never," he said.

"Of course not," Manley said. "Not as long as I can buy large diamonds. But never mind that. Mrs. Black you know, eh?"

Shayne nodded to the blonde woman. He looked at the other three people who had said noth-

ing so far. One was a small, thin man obviously ill at lease. That, Shayne decided, would be the appraiser, awed and apparently confused by it all. The appraiser had probably expected to come and do a job and go home, but, like Shayne, he now found himself on a cruise amidst luxury he had barely seen before.

"Mr. Joplin is my appraiser," Manley said. "I'm afraid he is shanghaied also. The tall gentleman is Walter Mills, my attorney and friend. Right, Walter?"

"All the way, J.P.," the tall, cadaverous man said, "as long as you pay me more than I'm worth."

The tall man, Walter Mills, was seated in a deep armchair with his long legs stretched out in comfort. Mills smiled at Manley and Shayne as he spoke, but Shayne decided that there was as much truth as humor in the attorney's reply. There was something in Walter Mills' eyes that was neither humorous nor friendly.

"The extra is for your soul, Walter," J.P. Manley said. "I pay for your soul, and you sell it, eh?"

"To the highest bidder," Mills said.

Manley smiled. "Then I must be sure never to be outbid, eh? I value your company, Walter."

The fat tycoon looked at Shayne. "I imagine I sound strange to you, Mr. Shayne. But I learned long ago that a man in my position must buy friends if he is to have any. Luckily, I need few, because the price is always high. I accept it, and so do my hired friends, eh?"

"The price is right," Walter Mills said, "and the product does not have a high demand. I might even be your friend without being paid. But you couldn't take that chance, could you, J.P.?"

"That's what I like about you, Walter," Manley said. "You aren't afraid to bite the hand that feeds you. Now Mario there is another matter. Mario insists he loves me, don't you Mario?"

The man called Mario flushed as Manley spoke. The last of the guests, Mario was a short, swarthy, powerful-looking man who wore an ill-fitting double-breasted suit. A faint, but tell-tale bulge showed Shayne where Mario was carrying a shoulder holster. He shifted uncomfortably as Manley stared at him. He smiled, but there was a sullen curve to his mouth that showed that it was only his lips that smiled.

"Mario Bonheur, Mr. Shayne—my companion and bodyguard and friend who loves me," Manley said. "Actually, I think it's my wife he loves. Why not, there is much greater closeness of age between them. Yes, I think Mario likes my wife very much. I'm not sure about what she feels for him, though."

"Aw, Mr. Manley," Mario the bodyguard said.

"Really, J.P.!" Charlotte Manley said sharply.

"Don't protest too much, my dear. Still, perhaps Mario really does like me. He should, you know. Mario is paid to protect me, but actually it is I who protect Mario. I give him legitimate employment. Lord knows where he would have ended up on his own. In some electric chair or gas chamber, I expect. Isn't that so, Mario?"

"Sure, Mr. Manley," Mario Bonheur said.

"You do anything I tell you to do, don't you, Mario? You never argue."

"Sure, Mr. Manley," Bonheur said. "Anything you say."

"Anything I say, like a good, dumb animal."

That's right, Mr. Manley," Mario said.

Charlotte Manley burst out. "Stop it, Phillips! Leave Mario alone!"

Manley smiled again. "He doesn't mind, my dear, do you Mario?"

"Like you say, Mr. Manley," Mario said.

"Of course," Manley said. "Where else could he get a job like this, or be near you, my dear?"

"Really, Phillips, I don't like your insinuations that—"

Mike Shayne stepped out onto the deck. The grotesque tension in the salon was beginning to anger him. He had seen men like Manley before. Rich men who hated everyone and did all they could to

hurt everyone and everything they touched.

As George Daley said, Manley was probably buying Black's diamond simply because he knew that Black did not want to sell it. It was obvious that Manley and Black's wife were more than acquaintances. Manley was the kind of man who would take another man's wife not because he wanted the wife but because he wanted to hurt the man.

Helen Black was the kind of woman who wouldn't care why Manley wanted her. Manley could give her what she wanted—the things that money could buy. It was typical of Manley's type to make Black come all this way to sell a treasured heirloom, and then invite Helen Black to make Black

squirm even more. The lawyer, Mills, wasn't a much better type, and Mario Bonheur was a dull-witted thug from the look of him.

Only Charlotte Manley seemed decent. Shayne had a sudden desire to conclude the deal and his part in protecting the diamond and get off this macabre yacht.

The desire became more pronounced when he turned and saw three members of the crew standing below on the foredeck and staring at the brief case in his hand. When they saw that they were under observation they melted away like shadows.

Shayne smiled crookedly and looked at the sun that was still high in the sky. It was going to be a long afternoon and night on the yacht. He turned and stepped back into the salon.

VII

WHATEVER ELSE HE WAS, J. Phillips Manley was a careful business man. It took most of the afternoon for the appraiser, Joplin, to do his work on the diamond, for Mills to make sure that all the papers for the sale were in order and to study and approve Black's various old bills-of-sale to prove his ownership of the stone.

By the time Mills had completed the legal details and Bonheur had brought the certified check from the safe in Manley's cabin next to the salon, and the diamond had been found to be real, it was dark outside the yacht. Only the red and green running lights of other boats, and the bobbing red and white lights of various buoys, were visible in the blackness.

But at last the deal was made, and Shayne turned the briefcase over to Manley. The eccentric fat man insisted on keeping it himself. From time to time at dinner in the isolated island yacht club, Manley removed the stone from its case and laid it on the table before him.

Manley made a great show of admiring the stone, with one malicious eye aimed at Montagu Black the whole time. Everyone was uneasy except the Captain, a leathery man named Jones who ate in silence.

Dinner over, they all went back to the yacht. Manley insisted on drinks in the salon. Joplin, the appraiser, seemed nervous and anxious for the yacht to get under way. But Manley said he did not like his drinks to spill, and ordered the Captain to keep the yacht at its anchorage just off the island where they'd had dinner.

Everyone was silent and ill-at-ease except Manley and Helen Black. The broker's wife perched on the arm of Manley's chair. Captain Jones ignored them all as he drank large glasses of rum.

"What are you going to do with the diamond, J.P.?" Helen Black asked.

"Well, now, I hadn't thought of that," Manley said. "I just bought it to help out Montagu. Perhaps I should give it to some worthy woman, eh?"

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Helen said, smiling down at the fat man.

"I should give it to Charlotte, shouldn't I? But, then, my dear wife is above such trifles. Now, you, Helen, you are not above such trifles, are you?"

"What do you think?" Helen Black snapped.

Manley laughed. "I think, my dear, that Montagu now has a great deal of money. Monty, you must spend it on our Helen."

"I expect I will," Black said.

"I expect you will, too," Helen Black said.

Black stood up. "I'll start by buying us all a fresh drink. Let's see, Captain Jones takes rum, Shayne is brandy, Helen gin, Charlotte sherry, Mills and J.P. take Scotch. What's yours, Bonheur?"

"Whisky," the bodyguard said.

"I know," Manley said. "I'll give the diamond to Mario! It would be the first one he had that wasn't stolen, eh, Mario?"

The bodyguard flushed again. In the silence, Black went around handing out the drinks. Manley took his whisky and watched his bodyguard.

"Well, Mario? Would you like the diamond? Or wouldn't it have

any value if you didn't steal it?"

"Anything you say, Mr. Manley," Mario Bonheur said.

Manley yawned. "Anything I say! You're beginning to bore me, Mario. In fact you all begin to bore me."

Manley tossed off his whisky and stood up. "Party's over. I suggest we all go to bed. Tonight we remain anchored here, Jones. Tomorrow they can all go to the devil!"

"But, J.P., darling, the night is young," Helen Black said.

Manley stared at her. The fat man picked up the briefcase containing the diamond.

"Your husband has money now, my dear, and I have my diamond. I think I'll keep it all for myself, eh?"

Laughing, Manley walked across the salon and into the corridor that led to his cabin. His fat

bulk shook as he vanished from view.

Soon after, Black and Helen went to their cabins on the deck below. Captain Jones continued drinking his straight rum. Walter Mills went for a turn on the deck. For some time Shayne sat and finished his brandy. He watched the young and pretty Charlotte Manley. The wife of the tycoon drank steadily, heavily, as if unaware of anyone else in the salon

Mario Bonheur sat sullenly watching nothing at all. The bodyguard only toyed with his drink. From time to time he looked at Charlotte Manley, but his dull eyes showed not the slightest trace of emotion.

Shayne left the salon when his brandy was finished. On the dark deck he walked around along the rail. He saw Mills standing in the shadows of the cabin staring out toward the distant mainland. The lights of a small boat bobbed on the surface of the sea. There were still a few lights on the island less than a quarter of a mile away. Shayne watched Mills for a time, but the lawyer seemed unaware of his presence.

Finally, Shayne went below to his cabin. He noted that there was still light under the door of both Black's cabin and Helen's cabin. That was another of J. Phillips Manley's little jokes—separate cabins for Montagu and Helen Black. Shayne felt very tired. He went into his cabin and undressed. He was asleep in minutes.

VIII

WHEN SHAYNE AWOKE he had no idea of what time it was. He sat up in bed. The tapping that he had thought was a dream was no dream. Someone was tapping on his door. A voice called softly.

"Shayne! It's Montagu Black! Shayne!"

Shayne leaped from his bunk and opened his door. Black stood there in his pajamas. The stockbroker was highly excited.

"It's Manley," Black said. "I was on deck and I saw someone go into his cabin! I swear I heard a thump and a groan, but the door is locked!"

Shayne turned, put on his trousers, picked up his automatic, and ran up onto the deck and into the corridor of the main cabin behind Black.

The door from the corridor into Manley's cabin was locked on the inside. Shayne pounded on the door. There was no answer.

"I hear someone in there!" Black said.

"Stand back," Shayne snapped. "I'll break it down."

"Hurry," Black said.

Shayne backed off, lowered his shoulder, and crashed against the cabin door. The door was solid metal and locked tight, and there was little room to move in the nar-

row corridor. Shayne backed off to lunge again.

"I'll try the deck door!" Black cried.

The broker ran down the corridor and into the salon. Shayne lunged again at the door and felt it give a fraction of an inch. Swearing softly, the big redhead lowered his shoulder and hit the door again. This time it gave more.

As Mike Shayne backed off for a final effort, two loud shots echoed through the quiet night and reverberated across the placid water.

Shayne lunged for the third time and the door splintered, gave, and tore open with a loud rending of metal. He was through it in an instant, but was brought up short by what he saw.

J. Phillips Manley lay on his bed in a pool of blood.

Shayne stopped inside the broken door, his grey eyes studying the scene. Manley was sprawled in his own blood, two holes in his fat chest.

The other door of the cabin stood open, the dark night and shining deck visible through it.

One of the two portholes was open.

The briefcase Shayne had carried all the way from Boston lay open on the floor of the cabin. Shayne did not have to check it to see that the diamond box was gone.

To see all this took no more than an instant. Through the open cabin door, the one Shayne had not broken down, the detective heard a sudden splash. Something, or someone, had gone over the side.

Shayne ran across the small cabin and out onto the deck.

The deck was empty.

Shayne went to the rail.

Just below, but already forty feet away, a small boat floated. Even as Shayne watched, its engine started with a roar and the boat raced away into the night. Shayne fired two quick shots, but the boat turned off its lights and vanished into the darkness.

On the yacht voices were beginning to cry out now. There was the sound of people moving. Behind him, Shayne heard a low groan.

He turned and bent down. Montague Black lay on the deck, an ugly wound on his forehead. As Shayne bent, the broker opened his eyes.

"Did . . . you . . . get . . ." Black began.

"No, he got away," Shayne said. "He had a boat waiting."

"The diamond?" Black said.

"Gone," Shayne said.

Black seemed to nod as if to say he had expected as much. The stockbroker struggled to a sitting position.

"Manley's been killed," Shayne said.

The stockbroker looked up at Mike Shayne from where he sat on

the deck and blinked his eyes as if he had not quite heard what Shayne had said.

"Shot twice," Shayne said.

"No!" Black cried. The booker seemed to shake his head as if to clear a fog. "No, I mean, why? How—"

"Did you see who slugged you?" Shayne said.

"No, nothing," Black said. He began to shiver. "I mean—I came around from the salon and the door was open and someone slugged me. That's all I know, Shayne."

"You didn't hear the shots?"

"No, I swear! He can't be dead!"

Mike Shayne tugged on his earlobe as he looked at the trembling broker. By now the others were all on deck. Captain Jones and the crew were milling around. There was a scream behind Shayne. He turned and ran into the cabin.

Charlotte Manley was staring down at her dead husband. Mario Bonheur was holding her arm to keep her from falling. The bodyguard had dressed in such a hurry that he had no coat on, and he had forgotten to put his pistol into its holster.

Walter Mills was deathly pale as he looked down at his dead employer. Helen Black had lighted a cigarette and was sitting on a chair.

"Mills, Bonheur, you better get the women out of here," Shayne snapped. "Ask Captain Jones to look after Black, and Mills—you better get him to radio for the police. We'll stay right here until they come."

They all nodded, unable to speak. Mills and Bonheur led the women to the salon. Captain Jones had two of his men help Black into the salon where they worked over the wound on the broker's head.

The Captain went toward the bridge where the radio was to call the police. Jones was a little unsteady on his feet from the effects of all the rum.

Alone in the cabin with the dead tycoon, Shayne lighted a cigarette. His steel-grey eyes went slowly over the whole cabin. The door he had broken down had been locked and chained inside. The second door, the one to the deck, stood open.

Shayne looked at the body of J. Phillips Manley. The bullets that had killed the tycoon had both struck within inches of each other directly into the heart. They were large wounds.

Shayne turned the body over. Both bullets had come out leaving horribly gaping holes—the work of a forty-five automatic at fairly close range. But there were no powder burns on Manley's chest.

There was a large bruise and lump just above the dead man's left ear. Shayne swore softly and began to tug very slowly on his earlobe. He walked to the open

door and stood again at the rail. He looked out over the water to where the small boat had been, estimating the distance as at least fifty feet, perhaps more.

He spun on his heel, went back into the cabin, and bent close down over the brass doorknob of the open door to the deck. The brass was highly polished. There was not a mark on the shiny surface. Shayne turned the door and looked at the outside doorknob. The outside knob was smudged with many fingerprints.

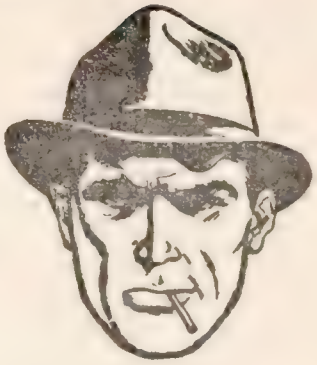
Shayne stared again out over the silent water, turned, and walked into the salon.

Charlotte Manley was sitting in a straight chair, her eyes red from crying. Walter Mills was being very attentive to the bereaved widow. Mario Bonheur was talking to Captain Jones. Helen Black sat smoking another cigarette, her eyes fixed on her husband, a faint expression of fear on her beautiful face.

She was, Shayne guessed grimly, wondering just how much Black would hold her flirtation against her now that there was nothing more to be had from Manley. Black himself sat alone with his bandaged head held in his hands. Joplin, the appraiser, seemed stunned.

"All right," Shayne said to them all, "where was everyone?"

"By what right do—" Mills began.



Montagu Black looked up. "Shayne's a detective, Walter. I hired him because someone was trying to steal the diamond. It looks like they succeeded, but—"

"But you never expected murder," Shayne said. "No one ever does. Mrs. Manley, you didn't share a cabin with your husband?"

"No," Charlotte Manley said. "I have the next cabin."

"You didn't hear anything?" Shayne said.

"Not until someone started to break down his door."

"You heard nothing else?"

"No," Charlotte Manley said. "The door, and the shots, and . . . and . . . he was a devil! I'm glad, glad!"

They all watched Charlotte Manley who now stared defiantly around the salon. Only Bonheur spoke.

"You'll be okay, Mrs. Manley," the bodyguard said.

Shayne looked at Bonheur. "You didn't hear anything?"

"Not before the shots. I heard

the shots, you know? So I come running."

"You forgot your pistol," Shayne said.

Bonheur looked at his empty shoulder holster. "Yeh, it's in my cabin. I was in a hurry."

"The police will want to look at it, you better get it," Shayne said.

Mario Bonheur left. Shayne turned to Walter Mills and Helen Black.

"Where were you two?" Shayne said.

"I was in my cabin across the hall from J.P.," Mills said. "I heard nothing either until you started to break down the door."

"You took your time coming out," Shayne said.

"I mind my business, Shayne. I don't like trouble."

"And I was in my cabin below," Helen Black said. "I heard a lot of noise, but it didn't seem important until the shots."

"All right," Shayne said. "Captain, you better check your whole crew to see if they're here, where they were, and what they heard."

"Right," Captain Jones said. "And after that, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne took out a cigarette and lighted it. "Then we wait for the police," he said.

IX

THE POLICE LAUNCH bobbed on the water beside the tall yacht. In the sun it looked like a small black fish beside a giant white whale. In the salon, Lieutenant Morgan of the Maryland State Police was summing up his hours of interrogation and investigation.

Everyone listened. Mike Shayne sat alone now in the high swivel chair that had been the favorite seat of the late J. Phillips Manley.

"It looks pretty clear," Lieutenant Morgan said. "Shayne and Black say there was an attempt to steal the diamond on the train. They were followed here. Black saw a prowler enter Manley's cabin, heard a thud and a groan. We found the bruise where Manley was hit. It must have taken the thief quite a while to find the diamond.

"When Shayne and Black came back, the thief was still in the cabin. Shayne tried to break down the door, Manley probably woke up, and the thief killed him. He ran out through the deckside door, slugged Black, and went over the side. He swam to the waiting boat and beat it. We've got an alarm out now. I think that about sums it up, right?"

They all nodded and looked at each other. Morgan closed his notebook. Shayne swiveled around in his chair to face them all, and then looked toward the Lieutenant.

"No," Shayne said, "I don't think it does."

"What?" Lieutenant Morgan said.

"It won't hold up, Lieutenant," the redhead said. "That diamond has never left the yacht, and neither has the killer."

In the silence Montagu Black touched his bandaged head. Helen Black lighted a cigarette and looked interested. Mario Bonheur lowered his shoulder and peered at Shayne as if ready to reach for his pistol. Walter Mills stared. Only Charlotte Manley seemed totally unconcerned. Captain Jones looked startled.

"Are you suggesting that one of my crew—" he began.

"We checked and searched the whole crew and their quarters," Lieutenant Morgan said. "Unless they were *all* in on it, they alibi each other."

"The thief wasn't in the crew," Shayne said. "In fact, there never was a thief. No one left that cabin, and the doorknob on the inside was wiped clean of all prints, even Manley's. If there had been a thief in that cabin he would have had about thirty seconds to shoot Manley, unlock the door, slug Black, and get over the side. With that close a time limit, he wouldn't have wiped off a doorknob. Besides, a professional would have worn gloves."

"All right, Shayne, it looks stupid," Morgan said. "But it could have been done."

"When I heard the splash of someone hitting the water," Shayne said, "I ran right out. That

boat was at least fifty feet away, probably more, and it started right up. No one could have swum to it that fast. No one swam from the yacht to that boat."

"Then what the devil did happen?" Morgan said.

"I figure that someone in the boat threw something to make the splash and then took off fast *on orders,*" Shayne said. "There wasn't anyone in the cabin, *the door was opened from the outside.* The diamond had been stolen a lot earlier, Manley left in the cabin, and the deck-side door locked from

the outside after the inside knob had been wiped clean.

"Manley wouldn't have wiped clean his own doorknob. But someone who was in the cabin earlier, and had to go out through that door, had to use the knob to open it. So later opening the door, he wiped it clean, and locked the door from the outside. He had the diamond, and he had that boat standing off to make it look like a getaway boat. All he had to do was get me and say he had seen someone go into the cabin.

"While I was breaking down the door, he ran around and opened up the other door. He signalled the boat to do its stuff and make it seem like an outside thief. Then he shot Manley, and he—"

"No!"

The shout echoed through the silent salon. Montagu Black stood shaking. The stockbroker's face was deadly white as he stared at Shayne.

"I always felt that something was wrong about the people who were supposed to be trying to steal the diamond," Shayne went on. "They searched the wrong train compartment. They were so good they made no sound at all, or I would have been awakened. Then they tailed us in a red convertible. Any color car can be used for that purpose, but it seemed a little odd.

"There never were any attempts to steal the stone. Black faked the attempt on the train and chloroformed himself. He hired a young man to tail us in the red convertible, making it red so we couldn't miss it. He also hired the same man to tail us in the boat and stand off for his final thief act.

"He hired me to have a witness to the train attempt and the tailing, but he didn't want me around at the final act. Only Manley was a real eccentric and made me stay on board. Black wanted me anywhere but here, but once I was here he had to call me to help him chase the non-existent chief or it would have looked peculiar. That was my job.

"Black wanted me off the yacht, and he was mad as hell at Manley. But he had to go through with his scheme because he knew there probably wouldn't be another chance. I figure he drugged Manley with that last whisky, so that he could get into Manley's cabin without waking him. Your Medical Examiner will probably find traces of a knockout drug in the autopsy now that he knows what to look for.

"Black went to the cabin when he was sure Manley was out cold. He stole the diamond, slugged Manley to make his story sound right, wiped the doorknob because his prints would have been on it, and then came running for me—after he'd hidden the diamond. He only tapped on my door, and called softly. I wondered about that. Normally a man in a hurry

would have pounded and shouted, but Black didn't want to awaken anyone but me. He didn't want more than one witness.

"I don't think you'll have much trouble finding the diamond, Lieutenant. Black's a real amateur. He'll probably have it in his toilet tank in his cabin, or some simple place like that."

With a sudden, stifled groan, Montagu Black fainted dead away. The small, balding stockbroker hit the floor with a heavy thud. They all stared toward the prostrate man. Charlotte Manley seemed about to go to Black's aid. Helen Black only looked at her husband with utter contempt.

X

TWO OF LIEUTENANT Morgan's Troopers flanked the figure of Montagu Black where he now sat propped up against the salon wall, a shot of whisky in his shaking hand. The Lieutenant held the shining diamond that glistened in the sunlight through the wide salon windows. The sun was half way up the sky now, and in the salon they all sat in silence. Helen Black had made herself a drink. The blonde drank without looking at her husband.

"Taped behind a picture," Lieutenant Morgan said as he looked at the diamond. "They always use the same obvious places to hide the loot."

"He never expected a search," Shayne said.

"Real careless," Morgan said. "We even found traces of the drug in the glass; he didn't wash it very well. We have a small field lab on the boat just for this kind of thing. I don't suppose we'll ever find that young punk he hired to playact, but it doesn't matter."

Suddenly the voice of Montagu Black echoed through the room. All eyes turned toward the sitting stockbroker. Black's voice was low, hoarse, a dull and a flat monotone.

"It was in my family for a hundred years. I couldn't let that pig keep it. But I had to sell. Helen was bleeding me dry. I had to sell, but I couldn't lose it, you see? It was so simple. Why did Shayne have to be here? If he hadn't—"

The balding broker stopped in mid-sentence. He blinked and seemed to smile, looking at all the faces staring at him in the sunny salon. Lieutenant Morgan scratched his jaw.

"What I just don't get," the Lieutenant said, "is why he had to kill Manley? As far as the ME can tell, Manley was still out cold from the drug."

Montagu Black dropped his whisky glass. "Kill?" the small man said. "Kill?"

Shayne spoke quietly this time. "He didn't have to kill Manley, Lieutenant," he said. "In fact, he didn't kill Manley."

This time even Helen Black stared at Shayne. Walter Mills sat bolt upright. Charlotte Manley covered her mouth as if to stifle a scream. Joplin, the appraiser, only blinked, not seeming to understand exactly what was happening. Mario Bonheur stared stolidly at Charlotte Manley. Captain Jones reached for his rum bottle.

"What?" Lieutenant Morgan said. "Damn it, Shayne, then who did kill Manley? It has to be Black. Who else could have had a reason or the opportunity."

Shayne was grim. "From what I saw yesterday on this boat I'd say just about everyone here had a reason to kill Manley. He may even have needed killing, it was probably inevitable sooner or later. But I think there was only one person who could have done it, except myself, and I didn't."

"One person?" Morgan said.

Shayne nodded. "It was strictly a spur-of-the-moment thing, Lieutenant. Someone heard Black and myself come up to Manley's cabin. He came running to see what was up. He was out there on the deck, and he saw what looked like a robbery in progress. He saw Manley lying there in the cabin, and he saw Black come running around and open the door. He saw his chance, and he took it.

"He slugged Black, shot Manley fast and straight, tossed his gun over the side, and beat it away. Then he doubled back and joined the crowd. You see, he thought it was a real robbery, and he was sure we would chase the thieves."

"Damn it, Shayne, who?" the Lieutenant said.

Shayne let his eyes rove over all their faces.

"Someone who hated Manley, who was an expert shot with a pistol, who was used to acting quickly, who had probably killed before, and who was carrying a gun right then and there. It had to be somone who used a gun in his work, so had it with him. A man who would automatically pick up his pistol, just as I would, when there was the sound of trouble."

His left shoulder low, on his feet like a cat, Mario Bonheur reached for his pistol in his shoulder holster. Instantly Shayne was on the swarthy bodyguard, but he was almost too late.

Bonheur had his pistol out just as Shayne's big hand clamped on his wrist. Shayne's other hand, curled into a massive fist, smashed into the man's dark face.

Shayne looked down at the unconscious Bonheur. "I wondered why his holster was empty last night. Later he went back and got his second gun. A professional bodyguard would have more than one. A paraffin test should prove that he fired a gun last night. We're still anchored in the same spot, and the Bay is shallow here, so a diver should find the gun."

On the floor of the salon, Mario

Bonheur stirred, blinked, sat up. The swarthy bodyguard rubbed his jaw and glared at Shayne. Then Bonheur shrugged and took out a cigarette.

"He had it coming, the louse," Bonheur said. "Six years I been taking it from him. Only it wasn't that. What he did to her—that was it. I saw him there, so I shot him. I don't care, she's rid of him. She's okay now, so who cares? Me, I don't care. She's okay now."

Mario Bonheur smoked and smiled almost like a doting father at the white face of Charlotte Manley. The small widow slid to the floor in a dead faint.

IT WAS DARK before the diver found the .45 Caliber automatic in the deep mud under the Bay where Bonheur had thrown it. A long-distance call proved it was registered to Mario Bonheur. The paraffin test had been positive. The police took Bonheur and Black away together. Mike Shayne went to shore in the same launch.

"I don't think there was anything between Charlotte and Bonheur. He just sort of worshipped her," Lieutenant Morgan said as he and Shayne stood in the stern of the police boat in the night. "She says she'll try to help, and with all the money she has now she might get him off with life, some kind of temporary insanity."

"I wouldn't feel bad," Shayne said. "Manley was a pig."

"Funny, but if you hadn't been there it might have worked for both of them. Coming in late, we probably would have really believed the robbery."

"It was Manley," Shayne said. "He really got them even from the grave. His arrogance in not letting anyone leave until he wanted them

to. It was really Manley himself who caught them."

Behind them, the giant yacht was a blaze of light. Shayne saw a single figure standing in the lighted door of the salon. Shayne guessed that it would be Charlotte Manley alone on her yacht now. Lieutenant Morgan guessed the same. Morgan nodded toward the distant figure of the widow.

"She wanted to cancel the sale of the diamond," Morgan said, "so we couldn't get Black for grand larceny. But that check was certified, and I don't think she can stop it. There's a full bill of sale, all legal, so the diamond belonged to Manley. The money is Black's. I guess the lawyers can sort it all out. But the charge on Black is grand larceny."

"She's a nice woman," Shayne said.

As he watched the small widow standing there in the distance, Shayne thought that perhaps some good had come out of Black's desperate scheme after all. At least the widow was free of her monstrous husband. She was rich, now, and she even had Montagu Black's family diamond. Not that Black would have much time to think of his diamond now. The money would be a lot more useful. With a good lawyer, as a first offender, Black might even get off light.

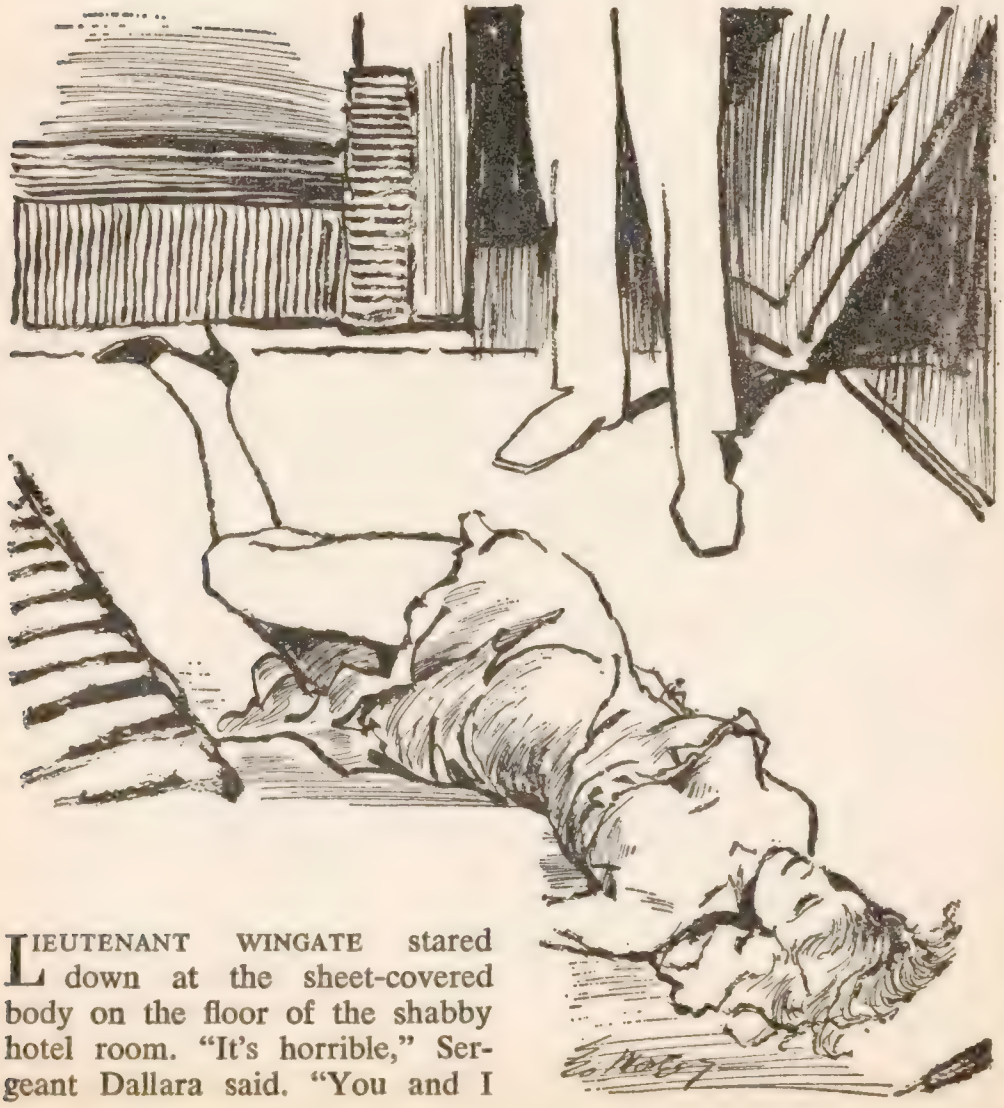
Mario Bonheur would not be that lucky. Shayne sighed to himself. It was, in a way, too bad, but even monsters like J. Phillips Manley could not be murdered. Still, Shayne decided that he would see if he could help Charlotte Manley hire a good lawyer for Bonheur. Temporary insanity might be possible. Mike Shayne wanted very much to help stop J. Phillips Manley from destroying more people from the grave.

The ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every issue.

Neighborhood Killer

It was an unusually brutal murder. And that posed a problem for Sergeant Dallara.

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG



LIEUTENANT WINGATE stared down at the sheet-covered body on the floor of the shabby hotel room. "It's horrible," Sergeant Dallara said. "You and I

know, Lieutenant, that what they say about police brutality is hardly ever true. But if I could get my hands on whoever did that I'd be tempted to step a little out of line, even if it cost me my badge."

"Well . . . that can't be ruled out," Wingate said. "Your nabbing him, I mean. You've got one clear advantage. You're as familiar with this neighborhood as you are with the lines on your palm."

"It's not bad neighborhood," Dallara said. "Run-down, sure. But very decent people live here. No suspicious prowler complaints in more than three weeks and no junkie arrests in six months. Show me a better record than that and it'll be ten to one someone is lying. About the lines on my palm—I couldn't sit down and draw you a picture of my palm from memory that would be one hundred percent accurate. It's the same way with neighborhoods. You can patrol a neighborhood for five years and then something like this turns up and you begin to wonder."

"That's right . . . you never know," Wingate agreed. "A killer that savage would almost have to be demented."

"I'm glad of one thing," Dallara said. "We're about through here. The sooner I see the basket go through that door the better I'll feel."

"That's right," Wingate said, nodding. "Your job now is to keep your eyes and ears open. I've a feeling we'll get another call—perhaps sooner than you think. Let's hope we won't arrive too late the next time."

"You talk as if you were sure, Lieutenant."

"You can never be sure. But a slaying as brutal as that usually means you've got a compulsive killer to reckon with. Something starts one of these Jack-the-Ripper types on a rampage and they don't just leave one dead woman stabbed thirty or forty times on the floor of a fleabag hotel to give us a lead as to what kind of a psycho they are. Their slayings usually run from four to eight—if you take the over-all average over the past fifty years."

"Yeah, I know—it's plenty gruesome," Dallara said, shuddering. "It's as unnerving as hell to think there may be that kind of fiend loose in the city."

"Anywhere in the city," Lieutenant Wingate said. "Next time it may be in a swanky neighborhood. But that's not too likely, and it gives us something to go on. If a deranged killer stabs a poor girl in a run-down neighborhood he's not likely to chose a Park Avenue matron as his next victim. All the statistics confirm it. There are exceptions, of course."

"You think whoever did this has a Skid Row address, Lieutenant."

"Not necessarily. He could have any kind of an address, and have a liking for a certain kind of neigh-

borhood, a certain kind of victim. When once a pattern has been established, a psycho has a strong compulsion to adhere to it."

"But you could hardly call one slaying a pattern," Dallara pointed out.

"To a psycho one killing is usually the beginning of a pattern," Wingate said. "I could be wrong in this case, of course. We'll just have to wait and see."

SERGEANT DALLARA didn't have long to wait. The call came at five o'clock the following afternoon. It wasn't a phone call, this time—a frenzied pleading terminating in a scream. It was a scream, all right, but it came from the ground floor of a converted brownstone on the adjoining street and Sergeant Dallara just happened to be passing in a radio car when he heard it.

Dallara swung in to the curb, descended from the car and crossed the pavement to the dingy vestibule in five long strides. A moment later he was pounding on the door of the first floor front apartment.

"Open up in there!" he shouted. "Open up, or I'll break the door down. This is the police."

Within the apartment there was an ominous silence. Dallara tightened his lips and a look of grim determination came into his eyes. He waited an instant longer for a key to click in the lock. Then he put his right shoulder to the door and heaved with all his strength.

The door crashed inward, and he leapt forward into the room. The first thing he saw was the knife. It was lying on the floor at the foot of an unmade bed and the blade gleamed redly in the sunlight that was streaming into the room from a window that was more than half raised. Then he saw the killer's victim—a slender woman with ash-blonde hair—lying stretched out on the floor and another red gleaming where her body rested.

There was a man at the window, and he was desperately trying to get it all the way up. But every time he tugged at it it made a rasping sound and moved less than an inch.

Dallara didn't give the obvious killer time to get the window unstuck. He crossed the room in a flying leap, grabbed him by both shoulders and hurled him with violence to the floor. Then he flung himself down on top of him and beat him into insensibility with his fist.

He was breathing harshly when he arose and crossed the floor to the telephone, which stood on a circular table on the opposite side of the room. He glanced just once at the slain woman, to make sure that she was beyond help. Her eyes were wide and staring but it wasn't just the distortion of her features and the glaze which had overspread her pupils which made

him certain that to put through a call for an ambulance would have done no good at all. She had been stabbed so many times that blood had soaked into every fold of her dress, and her throat.

It was then that the head pain hit him, almost doubling him up.

It had happened before, had happened repeatedly of late, but it had never been quite so agonizing. He had no clear recollection of putting through a call to the precinct. He only knew that he must have dialed the right number and spoken a few words into the phone, because twenty minutes later Lieutenant Ben Wingate was at his side.

Wingate's arm was about his shoulder and he was helping him across the room to a chair.

"Sit down, Tom—take it easy," Wingate urged. "I know exactly how you feel. Two within twenty-four hours, just as I feared and both the victims of a butcher. I'm glad I didn't have to subdue a maniac with a knife who could have slashed you to ribbons."

"He dropped the knife and was trying to get out of the window," Dallara heard himself saying.

"You still rate a citation," Wingate said. "And I'm going to see that you get one."

It gave Dallara no pleasure to hear Wingate say that. It was strange how unimportant a citation seemed when the man he hated most in life was right in the room with him. The man who looked and acted like a cop and had a way of taking over his mind and his body and making him do things he hated—like patroling a beat for five years in a crummy, run-down neighborhood and getting himself shot at while upholding law and order.

"How are you this morning, Sergeant Dallara?" they'd say, and deep down inside of himself he'd know that he wasn't really Sergeant Dallara at all.

Every time the pain came and everything became hazy and . . . yes, tinged with a kind of redness . . . that stupid cop whom everyone called Sergeant Dallara went rushing right away from him and he'd become his real self again. His real, deep-down, outrageously imprisoned self. He'd still be wearing Dallara's uniform, but he wouldn't have to think like a cop or act like a cop any longer.

What was it Wingate had said the day before? "He could have any kind of an address and a liking for a certain kind of neighborhood, a certain kind of victim. When once the pattern has been established he'd have a strong compulsion to adhere to it."

Well . . . whose fault was it if that pattern would have to be changed now? Whose fault that something totally unexpected had happened? How could he have known that someone in the same neighborhood would use a knife

on his girl friend because he was crazy jealous and thought she was two-timing him. Perhaps the guy they'd just handcuffed and taken away had had even more of an excuse. Perhaps the slain woman had been his wife. Perhaps Sergeant Dallara *did* rate a medal for knocking him out. But he wasn't Sergeant Dallara now, and a citation meant nothing to him.

When he closed his eyes he could still see the bloody knife lying on the floor at the foot of the bed. It was almost the same size as the knife *he'd* used when he'd established the pattern the day before by slaying a girl who wasn't anybody's wife. A no good tramp.

Well . . . he still had his own knife, the knife he'd used when he'd started the pattern, and tonight when it was quite dark he'd give Lieutenant Wingate something to ponder.

A Park Avenue matron would be just as terrified but would scream no louder than a girl in a shabby hotel room if she saw a shadow looming up behind her with a knife, and now that he'd been warned there was no reason in the world for him not to vary the pattern. Hadn't Lieutenant Ben Wingate said that there were exceptions?

Next Month's Complete Mike Shayne Novelet

REQUIEM FOR A KILLER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

George Bix was a professional killer. But Shayne found himself listening in sympathy when he said: "I met a girl a week ago. I liked her. A week later she's dead. I'm asking you to find the man who did it. I'm asking you to find him legit." "He's right, Michael," Lucy said. "If he's innocent, he has a right to be helped." There's a hurricane of trouble for the Miami redheaded private eye in next month's exciting Shayne.

Other Times

by ALEC RACKOWE

IT WAS THAT kind of case. Good, honest detective work had got as far as it could go. I was covering for the *Globe* as part of my beat at Police Headquarters.

I'd known Captain of Detectives Oliver Coyle since he'd shucked his patrolman's uniform for plainclothes. I said, "There's a lot of similarity between this and the Cushman case. You remember that one?"

Ollie Coyle has respect for my gray temples, besides which I'm the godfather of his eldest son.

I said, "Here you have three suspects and you know that one of them is guilty. But you can't get a confession or evidence strong enough for the D.A. to get an indictment. It was the same in the Cushman case. There were these two men. Uh—"

Ollie said, "Shipman and Shanley. You're slipping."

"I know but it was almost twenty years ago," I said. "At the end of the war. The department was stumped. Two men professing innocence, blandly pointing the finget at one another. So your predecessor, old Kingsley brought in Dr. Abernethy. He got a confession in the blink of an eye. He never would say how, but he got it. Now if he was around—"

Ollie said, "He is."

I opened my eyes as wide as last night's poker game in the Press Room would let me. "He's still alive? He's still teaching psychology at the U? He must be ninety-seven. A couple of years younger than I feel."

"He's seventy," Ollie said. 'He's Emeritus. He said he could-

Dr. Abernethy hated to see the police too far out on a limb

n't be of any use. He wouldn't even listen."

I said, "You don't mind if I look him up, do you? I might get a story to fill a page in the Sunday magazine section. I could use the extra money."

"Be my guest," Ollie said.

Dr. Abernethy still lived on the campus of Midwest U. Mrs. Abernethy told me to go into the library. I found the Doctor there. Small, lean, gray. He put down the book he had been reading, shook my hand and said, "Will you have coffee?"

I said, "I need bourbon. No ice. I feel my years. You've no right to look the same as you did when I met you on the Cushman case."

That got a smile. "I'm a great-grandfather now. Help yourself. The whiskies are over there. If you've come to ask me to help the police I can only tell you what I told Captain Coyle. I can't."

I brought my whiskey to a well-used leather chair. "Why?" I asked. "The body may creak a little but the mind is still agile."

"*Autre temps, autre moeurs*," Dr. Abernethy said.

I mentally translated that into English which is the method of all who took French in high school or college and haven't used it since. " 'Other times, other manners.' I don't get the connection."

Dr. Abernethy said, "I'm retired. I'm out of touch."

"You weren't in touch then," I told him frankly. "You were a psychologist, not a criminologist and certainly not a professional cop. You used psychology as an instrument. I saw you in action. You came into the Cushman house, you looked around, you asked a few questions. Then you pointed the finger at Shipman and he caved in. So where does the other times come in?"

Dr. Abernethy said, "You obviously remember the Cushman case."

I said, "I do. There were these three men, no better than they appeared to be. They'd been hooked up in some black market deals and they fell out over the way the proceeds had been cut up. Shipman and Shanley had come to Cushman's house. They'd stayed overnight. Cushman had a bad cold and stayed in bed in the morning. His housekeeper went to the corner drugstore for some cough medicine.

"When she came back less than fifteen minutes later Shipman and Shanley were downstairs. When she went up with the medicine she found Cushman *in extremis*. He'd been hit a classic whack with the classic blunt instrument—a bronze statuette with a clock in her middle that Cushman kept on his night table."

I took another gulp of my straight Kentucky General. "There were no legible fingerprints on the statuette. Even if it hadn't been

rough-surfaced the chances are there would have been no useful prints. They are found much less frequently than the average layman believes. Ask any D.A. or working detective. Fingerprinting is primarily a system of identification—not detection. If you've got a man's prints on file he can have a face lift, shave his eyebrows, grow a beard or have his legs cut off at the knees and his prints will still give him away.

"But clear, usable prints are largely a fiction. Unless a man rolls his thumb or his finger as he does when he's being printed for the record you are very likely to get nothing but smudges. So there were no prints on the murder weapon in the Cushman case, latent or otherwise. The kind of evidence that would have most impressed a jury we just didn't have."

I warmed to it, remembering. "All old Kingsley had was Shipman and Shanley. One of them had certainly given Cushman the Lizzie Borden treatment, because they admitted that no one else had come into the house while the housekeeper had been gone. Cushman was still alive when the housekeeper found him. He tried to speak. He said something like, 'Sh . . . Sh . . .' before he lost consciousness. He was D.O.A. when the cops got there. It had to be either Shipman or Shanley who had gone upstairs and done him in, deliberately or otherwise. Cushman had been trying to say one of their names."

Dr. Abernethy nodded, "That is how I recall it," he said.

"So there was old Cap Kingsley with two men with a motive and the opportunity," I went on. "They admitted that. But they had an alibi. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it an anti-alibi."

Dr. Abernethy reached for a pipe. I said, "Cute. They'd apparently had a little time to talk before the housekeeper returned. Shipman said he'd stayed downstairs while Shanley went up to talk to Cushman. Shanley said he'd stayed downstairs while Shipman went up to talk to Cushman. Shipman said he'd filled the kettle, put it on to boil and made himself a cup of tea while Shanley was upstairs.

"Shanley claimed he'd made himself a cup of tea while Shipman was upstairs. Each said he had no idea that the other had clobbered Cushman. They were in the kitchen when the housekeeper returned. The kettle was still on the light. It was almost full. The housekeeper turned out the light and when Shipman and Shanley went into the living room she washed the cup and saucer. There was only the one cup and saucer. Then she went upstairs with the medicine and found Cushman."

Dr. Abernethy blew out the match and his pipe burbled. I said, "Cap Kingsley went by the

book. So did the D.A. and so did Ollie Coyel who was in on it from the start. They didn't go for the rubber hose and confessions under duress. That backfires too often. They questioned Shipman and Shanley all night. All they got was that same anti-alibi. They had two men, one of whom was the murderer.

"They had to know which one before the D.A. could ask for an indictment. The Grand Jury wouldn't return a true bill otherwise. That was when they brought you in. You did just as I said: You looked the place over. Nothing having been touched, you talked to Shipman and Shanley and then you pointed the finger at Shipman and he caved in. Pure psychological magic."

Dr. Abernethy said, "It wasn't psychology. As Holmes would have said, it was elemental. It was like a trick a magician performs. If you don't know how it is done you think it must be a feat of magic. I didn't tell the D.A. how I knew Shipman had to be the one who had gone upstairs because I was suddenly overwhelmed with praise and publicity.

By the time I got around to thinking it over it was too late to confess that I'd just been lucky. If the Cushman case were to come up today I would be unable to say for sure, and demonstrate to Shipman that he had to be the giulty one. He'd laugh in my face."

I said, "I don't get it."

Dr. Abernethy said, "The single cup of tea was the clue Captain Kingsley held to. He agreed that one of the two must have stayed below because the full kettle would have taken some five minutes to boil, making the tea would have taken another minute and a couple of minutes for the tea to cool sufficiently to drink and a minute or so for the drinking. Too long for whoever had made the tea to go up and argue with Cushman and bash him before the housekeeper returned."

I said, "Cap Kingsley and Ollie thought it was Shipman who'd made the tea and Shanley who'd gone upstairs."

"Yes. Because Shanley was from Chicago and Shipman was originally from Liverpool. So who would be more likely to make himself a cup of tea? Obviously the Englishman."

"But how could you know that it was Shanley who had made the tea?"

Dr. Abernethy's white head moved. "You remember what I did. I listened to Sergeant Coyle speak to the men. I spoke to the housekeeper. I looked around the kitchen."

"And then you came out and said to Shipman, 'You were the one who went upstairs. You killed Cushman.' You pointed your finger at him and he sort of shrugged and that was it."

Dr. Abernethy said, "So much for eyewitness testimony. I didn't point my finger at Shipman. I held up my hand."

"So?"

"In the kitchen I'd looked into the cupboards. There was a small teapot. There was an opened package of tea. There was also a saucer with a pile of tea bags. The housekeeper told me what I wanted to know. That was how I knew that in all probability it was Shipman who had gone upstairs and Shanley who had made himself the cup of tea."

I said, "I still don't get it."

Dr. Abernethy said, "In those days we'd begun to use teabags in this country. But no Englishman would dream of such a horrid practice, given the chance to make tea in a pot with loose tea leaves. Even if there had been no packet of tea he'd have torn open a teabag, and put the loose tea in the pot. But not today. Today the whole world is Americanized. In England they have supermarkets, they have bowling alleys, they play bingo, they use instant coffee. They even, I'm sure, can buy tea in bags.

"When I held up my hand to Shipman I had the used teabag I'd found in the garbage can where the housekeeper had thrown it. That was the only psychology I used. I said, 'You have to be the one who went upstairs.' I showed him the messy brown bag pasted against my palm. That was when he shrugged."

The Doctor's own shoulders lifted. "*Autre temps, autre moeurs.* The Cushman case showed me that I knew nothing about criminal detection. I was saved from confessing my uselessness by a bit of elementary psychology that wouldn't work today. That's why I know I can't be of use to Captain Coyle. But give him my regards."

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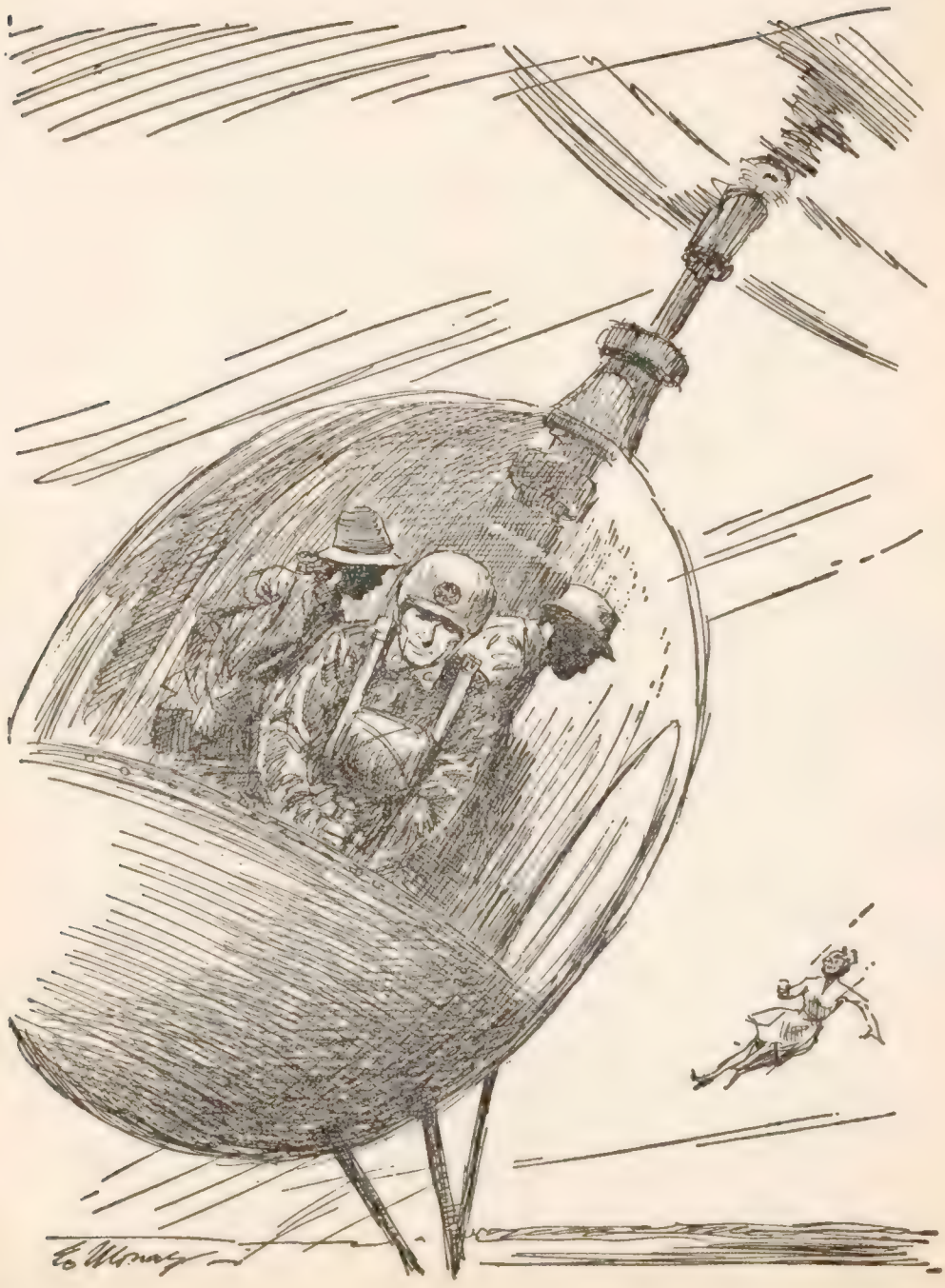


THE EXECUTIONER

When the bright face of danger beckons it's easy for some men to forget how often secret agents turn up missing, or come to rest at the bottom of the sea.

by MAX VAN DERVEER

IT WAS A bright New York morning, probably around nine o'clock. I could estimate the time pretty well from the slant of the Spring sun against the row of brownstones fronting the narrow street. From our vantage across the street, I methodically catalogued the details of the scene: the two rambling structures within our range, their stoops, the open front doors; the three vehicles parked at the curbing in front of the houses, the sparkling Mercedes incongruously sandwiched by the dented sedan ahead of it and the ancient station wagon behind it and the people moving along the sidewalk.

The people interested me the most—particularly the heavy Puerto Rican woman in the loose cotton dress, the lean guy with the rather large nose, and the young,

voluptuous girl in shorts and blouse. Street-corner idlers gawfed along behind the girl, all of them in their teens.

Something about the scene was strangely menacing and I sat there taut and alert.

"Watch the stoop on the left," Holly said.

I did so and saw a medium-statured man of forty-five or fifty appear in the doorway. I failed to recognize him as he paused briefly on the stoop to survey the street. He wore a conservative business suit, and a gray felt hat was perched straight on his head, the brim shadowing out details of his face.

He moved down the steps, crossed the sidewalk and got behind the steering wheel of the Mercedes. Seconds later, the Mercedes disintegrated in a violent explosion and the street became a bedlam of confusion and terror, littered with the injured and the dying.

"Lights," Holly said tersely and the tiny projection room became flooded with radiance. The scene on the wall screen before us dwindled and vanished and we were alone in the room.

Holly lit a cigarette and ran a palm across his close-cropped white hair. A small man, he had a pleasant, patrician face with deep blue eyes and could have been anyone's father. But I knew him as the head of Washington's most secretive Bureau.

"Three killed outright," he said somberly. "Five critically injured, four serious."

"Two days ago." I nodded. "Monday. I read about it in the Dallas papers, saw it on TV, heard it on radio. You couldn't escape it. You still can't. It's being played as a gangland vendetta."

"The man was one of ours," Holly said grimly.

I'd now guessed that much.

"He was filling a role, had taken on an identity," Holly continued.

"Of whom?"

"Der Doktor."

The name hit hard.

Der Doktor: In Europe, on this side of the Iron Curtain, the name was usually spoken in a whisper. On the other side, it raised hackles all over East Germany and the Soviet Union. *Der Doktor*: Master spy. Head of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst,* the Federal Intelligence Service of the German Federal Republic. The Soviet price on his head was reputed to be one million dollars.

"He's the only man outside Russia who knows what's really going on inside," Holly said. "He saw Germany's defeat before the end of World War II, he predicted the Soviet march into Iran in nineteen forty-six, the fall of Czechoslovakia two years later and the Berlin Blockade that same year.

He found Dr. Otto John to be a double agent, working for both American Intelligence and the Kremlin, and—"

"I know," I interrupted.

No one in our business—particularly if you are a graduate of the OSS—needs the briefing. *Der Doktor* is a legend. In his early years, he was a professional soldier. He came up fast under Hitler, and attained the rank of a Wehrmacht major general. He was made head of the Wehrmacht intelligence operations on the Eastern Front, and it was while serving in that capacity that he had come to realize how futile it was for Nazi Germany to go on with the war.

But Hitler never failed to turn a deaf and angry ear to any man who had the gall to question German superiority—and *Der Doktor* had disappeared along with several files stuffed with priceless information about the Russians.

When he came to the fore again, it was as an American spy, set up and financed by no less than the CIA. Later he became head of West German intelligence and now reportedly had over five thousand active spies working behind the Curtain.

I finished my mental reflection aloud. "A man addicted to disguises and fast cars. It could make him both easy and difficult to hide."

Holly grunted. "The Mercedes killed one of our best."

"*Der Doktor* is here in D.C.?"

Holly shook his head. "Chicago."

"Why?" I asked.

"That's privileged for the present, Kar. The less you know, the better."

I accepted the implied slight rebuke reluctantly. "All right. Can we backtrack?"

"Shoot."

"Where did we get the film?"

Holly crushed out the cigarette. "*Der Doktor* and two aides arrived in the United States on Sunday. Prior to that arrival—in fact, while they were crossing the Atlantic—word came to us via CIA there was to be an attempt made on his life. We set up pronto. We divorced *Der Doktor* from his friends immediately on debarkation and moved our man—a man of similar physical appearance—into his place and put a camera on him."

"Then we do not know the would-be assassins."

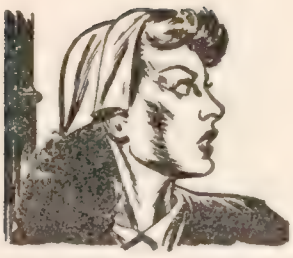
"We do not."

"Any ideas?" I asked.

"Speculation only. Perhaps the Kremlin, the KGB, perhaps some of *Der Doktor's* own people, someone in an Otto John role. He has about thirty trusted aides, but only five know about this operation."

"Three of the five remained in Europe," I said.

He nodded, his expression grim. "I know. But that doesn't mean they can be excluded. Not one of



the thirty, in fact, can be entirely eliminated."

"The two accompanying him," I probed. 'Are they aware of the switch?"

"No."

I lifted an eyebrow at him.

"They have been under twenty-four hour surveillance since their arrival," he explained.

"And they didn't go near our man."

"They did not. We are absolutely sure of that."

"So it must be someone else. Someone we don't know."

Holly nodded. "That's the way it looks, Kar."

"Let's see, as I recall the news stories, police are saying the explosion was a time bomb."

"Yes," Holly said flatly.

The flatness alerted me. "What happened?"

"We bungled the Mercedes. It was *Der Doktor's* personal car. He had it shipped over. After his business was completed, he planned a quiet vacation in the Rockies and he wanted his car. It was delivered to our man without a check."

"But a bomb. It seems to me the bomber was playing against very long odds. The car could have gone up in flames without anyone in it."

"*Der Doktor* is a methodical man with some firmly-established habits," Holly said tersely. "Harry Truman walks in the morning. *Der Doktor* drives. He's up by eight o'clock, breakfasts, and is driving at nine."

I didn't say anything.

"We're botching this all the way, I'm afraid," Holly said.

I frowned on him.

"There was another attempt on *Der Doktor's* life today. In Chicago. A sniper."

"Which means," I said slowly, "someone wasn't fooled."

"His aides flew into Chicago yesterday."

I knew what Holly was going to say before he made it official in one-syllable words.

"You go today. As a bum. Ride the rails."

"And do what?"

"You'll get instructions later."

"Code name?"

"Frank. Countersign, Logan. Your contact will be Ben."

"I'm surprised."

"Yeah?"

"Not Frankie and Johnny?"

"Head west, young man—and be damned careful."

I HEARD HIM long before I saw him. We were somewhere in In-

diana. It was a little after noon and we were pulling out from a long switching stop in a small town. I heard him pounding along beside the empty boxcar I occupied.

I stared at the half open, sliding door, wishing I had the gun Holly had prohibited. A battered suitcase came in the door and skidded across the rough flooring and then the man was rolling after it.

I was on him before he could get off his back. He lay under me, breathing hard, his eyes widening as I applied pressure with my thumbs against his windpipe. His hands came up. He caught my wrists. "Hey, Mac! Easy!" he rattled.

I didn't know him. He could be any innocent bum. On the other hand . . .

"Mac, please?" He jerked at my wrists, attempted to wrench my thumbs from their death-dealing grip.

I flipped him on his face, and yanked his left hand up high between his shoulder blades. He writhed as I went over the badly wrinkled and frayed suit with my free hand. He was clean.

I released him and sat back on my heels. He continued to lay on his face, breathing hard. He was a heavy little man of perhaps thirty-five, but I already knew the heaviness about him was deceiving. He wasn't flabby. He was hard as marble. There was a strength in him that could be disastrous to a foe.

He turned over slowly and propped the plump body up on his elbows and stared on me from eyes that were small and black. His face was wet with perspiration, smudged with dirt, round and unshaven. He was still breathing harshly when he sat up to grab wide-spread knees.

"You play rough, pal," he wheezed, massaging his throat with a thumb and forefinger.

"Maybe you shouldn't have piled in here," I said. "There's plenty of empty cars ahead and behind."

"I wanted this one," he said bluntly.

"Yeah?"

"Got a cig?"

"No."

He looked at me hard. "Your file card said you used them—Frankie."

The use of my code name didn't mean a thing to me. I'd been in the game a long time. I knew the opposition. They were clever. The breaking of a code sometimes is a simple matter. I returned his stare in complete silence. I needed more. I also knew he had cigarettes in a shirt pocket.

"Okay." He shrugged. "I knew a guy like you once. Name was Kevin Kar. An occasional smoker. Didn't have the habit. Just smoked when he got the urge, otherwise he

didn't even carry the damn things. I don't see how you guys do it. Me, I've got the habit." He dug a cigarette out of the tattered shirt pocket and lit it. "How far you goin'?"

He wasn't coming up with the right words.

"Detroit," I said.

"Then you caught the wrong train."

"I can catch another one."

"Yeah." He looked speculative. "If you know this road."

"I don't," I said.

"Try Logan, Illinois. It ain't far. You can get a car out of Logan to Detroit. Ever hear of Logan?"

"No."

"Nice little town, Logan. My mother once told me, 'Bennie, if you never see Paris, you gotta see Logan.' Beats me why she figured I had to—"

"Knock it, Bennie. I'm not interested in your mother."

His look became sly. He sat quiet for a couple of seconds and then he used a foot to push the battered suitcase to me. "You're interested in this, pal."

I opened it without taking my eyes from him and found clothing that had been taken from my D. C. apartment.

"You may not be the best pressed man in Chicago, Frankie, but you'll get by."

He was beginning to get to me, but I still didn't trust him completely. The code names could have been picked up. Anyone could have gained entry to my apartment and packed a suitcase. I could have been followed from D. C.

I dug down under a pile of spare socks and found my .38 Smith and Wesson Special in the shoulder rig. The guy opposite me didn't move a muscle as I took out the gun and hefted it. We weighed each other and he took on stature in my estimation. He was either stuffed with fortitude or leveling.

I put the gun on the floor, kept it handy while I changed into a white shirt and the wrinkled, brown suit. Bennie—if he was Bennie—watched me impassively. He didn't speak until I was knotting the necktie. Then he said, "You'll be getting off soon."

I watched his hand go inside the shoddy coat he was wearing. I was squatted. I could pick up the Smith and Wesson Special and trigger it in a single movement.

He brought a scuffed wallet out of the coat and passed me a fold of bills. "It's a small town. There's a bus for Chicago out of there at four-thirty this afternoon. In Chicago, you check into a hotel." He gave me the name. "You register as Homer Clarey, newspaperman, Baltimore."

I waited for him to continue. He got up and walked over to the door, shoved it wide open. The train was crawling up a steep grade. He looked back at me, started to say something, then

clamped his lips and leaped.

I was at the door in time to see him rolling down a grass slope.

THE NEON LIGHTS of Chicago winked invitingly out of a warm, noisy night as I rode the back seat of the cab from the bus depot to the hotel, but I wasn't interested.

I scrawled *Homer Clarey, Baltimore,* on the registration card and then the efficient clerk said, "Ahhh, Mr. Clarey."

I stiffened at the tone of familiarity, but all he did was whisk an envelope from a pigeonhole behind him and put it on the desk before me. "This letter arrived in the morning mail, Mr. Clarey. As you can see, it was marked, *'Hold'*. Thus, we were expecting you."

I was put in a pleasant, if conventional, third floor room and left alone. The letter was from Holly. It contained the holder's half of a Chicago bus station luggage check tag and a single sheet of neatly-folded paper. One word had been typed on the paper. A woman's name: EDNA.

I scowled on the stub and the name. How were they related?

Were they related?

I folded the paper, went into the tiny bath, burned the paper over the toilet bowl and returned to the room. There was a single window. I stood staring out on the neon panorama. *Der Doktor* was out there. So were a couple of his pals.

Why hadn't Holly given me a specific assignment?

I did my best to relax in the only overstuffed chair in the room, but my thoughts kept taking a gloomy turn and I had to fight an impulse to get up and pace the floor. Vague assignments never had appealed to me. I had to put up with them, of course, but that

did not mean I had to like them. I preferred something I could come to grips with straight off.

Holly could have sent me to Chicago to shadow a dangerous character at maximum risk—but he hadn't. He had sent me here to meet an enigma named Edna. For the moment danger had no face, bright or otherwise.

The knock on my door was light, but firm. I didn't move from the chair. I frowned at my wrist watch. Eleven o'clock. The knock was repeated. I shifted the shoul-

der gun rig a bit as I crossed the room, leaving my coat open.

The girl in the corridor was perhaps five-two and about a hundred pounds. Rich brown hair under a perky hat framed a face that couldn't have viewed more than twenty-eight years and her slender, attractive figure was enhanced by a pale green dress that brought out the hazel color of her eyes.

"Hello, Frank," she said in a voice designed to let any chance eavesdropper think we had known each other all of our lives—which, of course, we hadn't. She was a total stranger to me.

She stood for a moment, her head cocked, and then she pushed past me into the room and I was leaning my shoulder blades against the closed door.

She pirouetted. "My name is Edna." She was bouncy with schoolgirlish enthusiasm. Her eyes were speculative but her smile was genuine. "How are things in Logan?" she asked.

Holly was getting them attractive these days.

Maybe too attractive.

And I didn't like the show of enthusiasm.

I asked bluntly, "Are you sure you have the right room, Miss . . . er . . ." I let it hang purposely.

"Paton," she said. "Rita Paton." She went to the overstuffed chair, sat, crossed trim dancer's legs and put a purse on her lap. "Yes, I'm sure I have the right room, Frank. I asked at the desk."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have."

"I asked for Homer Clarey."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have," I repeated.

She flushed angrily. "Really, Mr. Kar," she said, clipping the words slightly now, "I am quite capable in spite of what you might think."

I took out the Smith and Wesson Special. "I'd be terribly disappointed, Miss Paton, if you didn't live up to your own billing. It would grieve me if I had to kill you."

I held the .38 in line with her heart.

The color in her cheeks became more pronounced. Her faintly painted lips thinned. She remained silent for a few seconds and then she said, "I sincerely doubt, Mr. Kar, that you'd have the slightest scruple about carrying out that threat—if you were given no choice. I have been thoroughly briefed about you."

"More."

I didn't move the gun.

Her eyes held mine. "There's an international intelligence powwow in the offing."

"Between?"

"A friend from Europe and Uncle Sam's head men."

"Where?"

"Here."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Go on, Miss Paton."

"It seems our friend has stumbled on some devious plans for the future concocted by certain people behind the Iron Curtain."

"Stumbled?"

"That, Mr. Kar, was a figure of speech. Will you please put away that gun? You don't need it."

"I'll make that decision, Miss Paton."

"Then make it."

"How long have you been around?"

"Twenty-seven years."

"I mean in this business."

"Three years."

"You're too attractive."

She looked surprised.

"In an almost professional way, as if you—" I shrugged, feeling quite sure that she would not mistake my meaning.

"I've been in show business, Mr. Kar," she said.

"Where?"

"Hot Springs—until a man named Faubus suddenly realized this is an election year and closed everything. But that shouldn't interest you. I doubt that a man of your breed—"

"You've never met men of my breed."

"Should I be grateful for that?"

"What else did you do in Hot Springs?"

"Kept my little pink ears open."

"Listening post, huh?"

"You can find an interesting clientele in Hot Springs, Mr. Kar—if you look."

"I think I'm going to like working with you."

"We won't be doing anything together unless you put away that gun."

I stuffed the .38 in its rig and grinned on her suddenly. "We're a team, huh?"

"Yes." She'd lost some of her enthusiasm.

"Doing what?"

"Surveillance."

'Der Doktor?"

"His friends."

"And just where is *Der*—"

"I don't know. But right at the moment I'm not interested in him. Neither are you. You're interested in his traveling companions."

She opened the purse on her lap then. I watched her closely, ready for anything. But all she produced was a photograph of a man and a woman in swim suits. They sat on a strip of sand, their arms entwined. The man could have been any well-constructed thirty-year-old German male. The woman was blonde and too heavy for my taste. Her eyes were set wide in a plain, flat face.

"Our instructions are to watch every move they make," Rita Paton said. "We relieve the present team in the morning."

"Where?"

"They've taken a suite as man and wife at another hotel. The

suite is bugged. We have the adjoining room."

"We?" I cocked an eyebrow, and returned the photograph. "A room? Together?"

"*Der Doktor* is to be kept alive —at any cost," she said significantly.

I rubbed my palms in mock anticipation. "The next day or two should prove the opposite of boring," I said.

"They could separate," she said, ignoring my sudden enthusiasm. "If they do, you take the man, I take the woman. We must be prepared." She uncrossed her legs suddenly and stood up.

I towered about a foot over her. "Where are you going?"

She inventoried me steadily from the hazel eyes. "I'm using a friend's apartment here in the city. She is currently on a junket to the Indian Ocean."

"How about a drink?"

"Sorry, but—"

"There's a cocktail lounge just off the lobby."

She shook her head. I shrugged resignedly, and steered her to the door and into the carpeted corridor. I wondered why she hadn't mentioned the ticket stub Holly had forwarded. Was she aware of the stub's existence?

"Won't you consider changing your mind," I said. "Frankly, I need a drink badly, and solitary drinking is never—"

To my surprise she laughed and

said: "Well, all right. You seem to be a most persistent man."

We turned a corner and entered a short corridor that housed two elevator doors. The air was blue-gray with cigarette smoke and I spotted five butts sticking up from the sand depository between the elevator doors.

I glanced up at the wall indicators. One of the elevators was going down, the other coming up. I wondered who was aboard the descending elevator. Innocent hotel guests—or someone who had stood a vigil in the corridor waiting to see which room Miss Paton had visited?

WE SAT ON tall, high-backed chairs at the bar in the shadowed lounge. The guy was smooth. A pro. He waited five minutes before

he entered and he didn't bother to give us a glance, but I spotted his reflection immediately in the back-bar mirror. He sat at a small, round table near the door and ordered. He was lean, had a large nose and was nattily attired in a gray flannel business suit.

I knew him from the film I had viewed in Holly's projection room. Where had he picked me up? It didn't seem possible that he could have.

I took Rita's elbow as she finished her drink and turned her out of the tall chair.

"Don't look startled," I said. "There's someone here who will probably follow us when we leave. I have to make sure."

She looked faintly surprised, but she didn't protest as I escorted her from the lounge, across the hotel lobby and outside. I fingered a cab and got into the back seat with her. She gave the driver an address. I spotted the guy out of the corner of my eye as we pulled away from the curbing. He was on the sidewalk and waving for a cab, too.

"I guess I was mistaken about him," I told Rita. "He didn't follow us."

The apartment Rita Paton had borrowed was in a tall, white building in a quiet, modest neighborhood. I told the cab driver to wait and went inside with her. I didn't see our shadow as we entered the building, but I knew he was somewhere behind us. We rode a whispering, self-service elevator up to the ninth floor and then Rita turned to me at the closed door of the apartment.

"Phone me in the morning, Mr. Kar," she said.

"What time?"

She took a key from the purse and inserted it in the door knob, but she didn't open the door. "Nine o'cock. I—" She hesitated. "I enjoyed the drink."

I chucked the tip of her chin with a cupped fist. "Thank Uncle Sam. It's his money"

"Good night."

"'Night."

I left her as bait, rode the elevator down to the third floor, got off, and jogged to the door with the red bulb over it at the opposite end of the corridor. Outside, I drew in a deep breath and stood on the fire escape landing for a moment, staring down into the blackness of the alley. I shifted the gun under my coat, went down and walked along the wall up to the alley entrance. My cab was still waiting. I couldn't find a second cab.

Had the big-nosed guy already gone into the building? Did he know where to find Rita? Was he now on his way up there?

I was torn by indecision.

And then, hatless, she came out of the building. I watched her cross the sidewalk and lean into the cab as if paying the driver. A moment later, she was going back to the apartment and the cab was

moving down the street. Materializing simultaneously at the far end of the block, a man walked toward me with long strides. He turned into the tall, white building.

I gave him thirty seconds and went after him. When I crossed the small lobby, the wall indicator told me the elevator was on the ninth floor. I thumbed it down. Riding up, I wondered what I would find when the automatic doors in front of me opened again.

It wasn't what I expected.

The door to Rita Paton's borrowed apartment was wide open; there was no sound. I moved into that doorway silently with the .38 in my hand. I didn't need the gun. The big-nosed guy lay sprawled out on the floor, his eyes wide and staring, his shirt front drenched with blood. His right hand still clutched the scissors sticking from his pigeon chest, and an ugly-looking .45 was lying on the thick carpeting at his feet.

Standing over him, Rita Paton turned on me. She was a bit disheveled, but she hadn't lost control. "I knew something was wrong when you didn't leave in the cab. You lied to me, didn't you? He was following us. Who is he?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully."

"How long has he been following you?"

"For hours maybe, before we made contact. I think he trailed

you through me. Or perhaps it was the other way around."

She frowned.

I closed the door. "The neighbors might not understand."

She looked down on the dead man as if I hadn't said a word. "He didn't use the door buzzer. He knocked. When I opened the door, he was standing there with the gun in his hand."

"The scissors?"

"I didn't like it when he knocked. I had them behind me when I opened the door. Thank God, he didn't attempt to kill me out there in the corridor."

"Remind me, honey, never to knock on your door when there's a buzzer," I said.

She shook her head, stared on the man. "I wish I could place him."

"Huh?"

"I have the strangest feeling I've seen him before."

"Perhaps you've been working with him?" I suggested.

She was beautiful in anger. The hazel eyes snapped, the lips became a thin line, and she swung her arm hard.

I caught her wrist and yanked her toward me. I brought my lips down on hers, hard. But after a moment of that her two small fists driving into my solar plexus made releasing her something of a relief.

"I think, Mr. Kar," she said, breathing hard, "that we should concentrate on disposal of a body."

"We?" I said, rubbing my stomach and grinning on her. "He's your body."

"If I'm forced, I'll scream."

"And make Holly angry? Wouldn't that be unwise? You know as well as I do that you're not supposed to become involved with the local gendarmes."

"Which is exactly why you are going to help me, Mr. Kar. Because if I scream, you will become involved with the local gendarmes."

She had a point.

DISPOSAL OF THE deceased presented no problem. Rita Paton had access to her friend's car. But removal of the body from the borrowed apartment was something else. When you considered all facets there was only one method.

Rita shook her head in awe and disbelief when I told her. "We'll never get away with it. Dangle a dead man from a window and—"

She broke off as I turned to the door. "Where are you going?" she asked crisply.

"I have to call a man about a funeral. Keep an eye on our friend, huh? I wouldn't want him gone when I return."

I found an all-night drugstore three blocks from the apartment building and went inside. The dead guy's pockets had been clean except for a carelessly kept motel receipt I'd found stuffed in his coat. The receipt was from a place called the Sunshine Motel and the guy had registered as a Thomas Barclay from what had to be a fictitious address in Atlanta, Georgia.

I used a phone booth and put in a call to Holly in Washington. He listened to me without interrupting until I described Rita Paton. "Who is she?" I asked.

"Edna."

I grunted, finally satisfied, but perhaps not quite as relieved as I should have been. "She thinks she knows the dead guy," I said.

"Hot Springs?" he asked sharply.

"She didn't say."

"We'll go to work on him immediately. The film and the files. Give us a couple of hours and then call again."

"I'll need all of that for the funeral, Chief."

"Limit the pallbearers to two—please?"

He wouldn't have liked my retort, so I hung up.

When I returned to the apartment, I found Rita on her hands and knees looking every bit the role of a frustrated housewife removing Junior's muddy footprints from a freshly-scrubbed floor. The difference was, she had a pan of cold water and a heavy towel, and she was attempting to soak blood from the thick carpeting.

She sat back on her heels and pushed a straying loop of hair from her eye while I passed on Holly's information. "You could have used the phone here," she said tersely. "I've—"

"It could be bugged."

"What!"

"Look, honey, in case you haven't spotted it yet, there's a two-way street in this racket. The other side is just as clever as we sometimes think we are. Smarter on occasion."

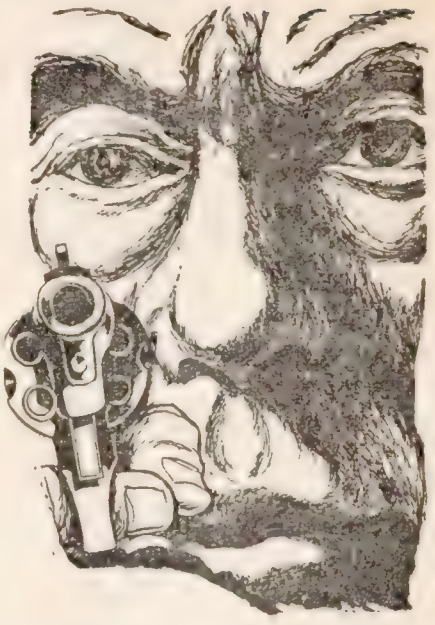
"But—"

"Soneone has you tagged," I said. "I hope it was only this guy, but I've a hunch he had friends. Let's get to the chore."

"But what about all of this blood?"

"The taxpayers will buy your friend new carpeting."

Removing the dead guy from the apartment was a bit macabre, perhaps, but not too difficult. I stripped the sheets and blankets



we needed, fashioned a loop around his neck, tied the opposite end of the makeshift rope to the bed and then took a look outside.

The alley below was black and there were no lights in the windows of the apartment building opposite. I wondered how many eyes were watching us from the darkness. It was almost two o'clock in the morning now, but the world is suffering an acute case of insomnia these days.

I listened. Only the city night sounds.

I pulled my head back inside, and told Rita to turn off the lights. Then I hoisted the dead guy over the sill and lowered him one floor. He dangled against the window of the hotel room just below us. The landing of the fire escape was to his left.

I turned and spoke urgently to Rita. "When I get down there, swing him. Make it fast. Then get the car."

All she did was nod.

I didn't meet anyone going down and out onto the fire escape landing. The dead guy dangled about eight feet out from me. I looked around. Everything appeared normal. I waved my arms to Rita and she began swinging the guy. It seemed an eternity before I captured him, but it probably was only a few seconds.

I loosened the loop and she pulled the makeshift rope back up and inside. Then I hoisted the dead guy to my shoulders and started down. I had to wait for her when I reached the alley. She drove in without headlights. Getting the corpse in the trunk took five full minutes, and it left me feeling drained, with sweat trickling down my face.

"Hey!" The graveled shout was like a knife against my spine. I jerked and spun.

"You! Down there! What's goin' on?"

The shouts came from above me. I couldn't make out a window light or a figure, but I didn't waste time searching. I piled into the sedan behind the steering wheel and spewed gravel leaving the alley.

It took a while to find a highway, but we finally were pointed out of the city. No one was following us. I drew my first good breath in the last ten minutes.

The sedan was big and had power. Rita sat against the opposite door without saying anything. I figured the night was beginning to catch up with her, but I appreciated the silence as we rolled through the suburbs. I kept a sharp eye out for the kind of place I needed and finally found it in a small village.

The village streets were quiet, but there was an all-night drive-in at one end of town. I got out of the sedan in the business district and sent Rita back to the drive-in.

"Ten minutes, honey," I told her. "Don't fumble it."

She drove off and I headed into the alley behind the hardware store. It was heavily shadowed, and there were odd-shaped lumps along the walls. I attempted to walk light, but the soles of my shoes crushing the grit sounded like crackling rifle shots to me.

Midway in the alley I froze in stride, my fingers clutching the gun butt under my coat. My heart skipped a beat. A shadow, much larger than the others, loomed ahead. I crouched slightly, waiting for the shadow to make its move. It didn't. I took a step to my left, stiffened for the voice I was sure would leap at me.

Silence.

I moved ahead.

The shadow remained immobile, took shape—and I breathed

once again. The shadow was two small boxes on top a large carton.

I turned into what had to be the rear of the hardware store. The door was easy to open. I pulled in a deep breath and threaded through the dimness and finally found the shovels. I selected one with a long handle, the kind used on construction jobs, and was back at the entrance of the alley when Rita stopped for me. We left the village behind us quickly.

Thirty minutes later, the guy was buried in a wooded area and I had disposed of the shovel in a creek. Rita pointed the sedan back toward the city. I let her drive until I spotted a street-corner phone booth.

In Washington, Holly came on the line immediately. "We had him in the files," he said. He gave me a name, and went on tersely: "He's German and has occasionally worked for *Der Doktor*. His last job was about a year ago. In Europe, Edna worked our side of the same operation. They didn't work together, but they could have chanced across each other. We don't know how he got into this country, or when."

"He wasn't in steady employment with our friend?"

"Not as far as we know. His record indicates he was unreliable, and could be swayed by a higher dollar."

"But he wouldn't operate alone."

"No," said Holly.

"Speculation?"

"Edna showed you a photograph."

"We'll be on them later this morning."

"Hunh-unh. We're changing signals. One of those two could know Edna. We'll leave the present team

on while you take a unit at the Sunshine. A visit could tip the hand we need."

"And if there is a visitor?"

"You watch. No more. Register as Mr. and Mrs. Homer Clarey, Baltimore. I'll want to phone you."

"Edna's going to love you."

"She can't reach me from there."

THE SUNSHINE was a weathered, roadside motel a few miles outside the city. According to the receipt I'd found, the dead man had been in unit 7-A. I banged on a desk bell, awoke the manager and asked for 7-B. Luck was with me. The manager was too sleepy to ponder the request and 7-B was empty.

A few minutes later I was sitting on the edge of a double bed grin-

ning up at Rita Paton who stood braced against the closed door and looked caught up in uncertainty.

"I've got a hunch—" she said and let it hang.

I let my grin spread. "I plead innocent, honey."

"Why should it take two of us to watch an empty unit?"

"One sleeps, the other plays sentry."

"And you can wager everything you possess, Mr. Kar, that's exactly the way it's going to be."

"Tell me about a man in a grave."

She came away from the door, and sat in a chair opposite me. I watched appreciatively as she crossed her legs. "I remember him," she said from far away. "I think I saw him only twice during the several months I was in Europe, but I remember him now. Do you recall the French scientist who was electrocuted in Paris when someone hooked the high voltage cable to the microphone?"

"Vaguely."

Rita bobbed her head. "He probably knew more about aerospace than any other man in Europe—and he was coming to Cape Kennedy."

"Which prompted certain people to become—"

"Executioners," she interrupted soberly.

"And you?"

"We found the people."

"And now they've found you."

She looked at me steadily. "What do you mean?"

"Our dead friend followed you to me from somewhere. I refuse to believe he merely chanced across you."

She frowned.

"Where were you before you came to the hotel?" I asked.

"Checking—" Rita hesitated, then the frown disappeared. "Checking out some things with the other team."

"In their room?"

She nodded.

"And *Der Doktor's* friends were next door?"

"Yes."

I spread my hands. "So there it is. He picked you up at their hotel."

"Doesn't that imply he had a reason for being there?"

"I'm convinced he was working with or for one—or both—of *Der Doktor's* pals."

She looked down on the fingers holding her skirt and didn't say anything for a long time. Then: "I forgot something, didn't I?" Her voice was soft in self-chastisement. "I wasn't careful."

"I wouldn't worry about it now, honey."

"But I—"

"Holly apparently thinks you know your stuff," I interrupted, "or you wouldn't be sitting where you are. You'd be on your way to the boon docks. He'd have told you to fly."

Rita sat silent.

I let her stew for a while and then I turned on a grin again. "Come here."

She looked up quickly and stared. I saw the expression in her eyes change. She sat a little straighter, her shoulders squaring with determination not to leave the chair.

"I haven't lost anything over there," she said.

"We have time to kill."

"Go to hell."

I got up and went to her instead. I braced myself over her and kissed her. She didn't exactly respond, but she didn't beat at me with her fists this time, either.

"Who's going to take the first watch?" she asked a few seconds later.

"I will."

"That sounds dangerous—for me." She chewed her lower lip. "I'm not sure I want to sleep under your watchful eye."

"You couldn't be safer, honey."

"I wonder how many girls have bought that—and later wondered what happened to them?"

RITA PATON slept four hours—I won't say entirely unobserved—but peacefully. She looked younger in sleep. I wondered how she had become involved in our racket. I wondered if she really had been an actress. I wondered—

She came awake without my moving from the chair. I watched her stretch luxuriously. And then she sat up on the edge of the bed and smoothed the wrinkled dress automatically and went, without finding her shoes, into the bathroom. When she returned, she said, "Thanks."

I shrugged. "So I'm a man of integrity."

She leaned over and kissed me briefly. "Get some sleep, man of integrity. What's going on next door?"

"Nothing."

She parted the drawn drapes and looked out on the brightness of the morning. "Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know. Frankly, I don't like—"

The jangle of the phone cut me off. I swept it up. Holly's voice in my ear was curt: "How's the front?"

"Quiet. No action."

"There's to be a meeting of minds today," he said. "I attempted to head it off until we can be sure of certain people, but the minds are being stubbornly determined."

I didn't say anything.

"You have a luggage ticket. Use it. After you pick up the suitcase —" The instructions came fast. He didn't waste words. And I didn't interrupt.

When he had finished, I said, "Edna?"

"She's to remain there. Keep her eyes open."

"Check."

"This is big, Frank. We need command performances on all fronts."

"Sure."

I heard him put the phone together on his end, but I stood there for a few seconds digesting the instructions before I turned to Rita Paton. She hadn't moved from the window. She was stone-faced. I lifted the receiver again, got the desk and asked for a cab. Then I filled in Rita. An hour later, I was in the city.

The cab deposited me at a bus depot. I walked into the coffee shop and killed fifteen minutes. According to the time schedule outlined by Holly, I now had exactly two hours.

No one followed me when I left the coffee shop and picked up the worn suitcase with the luggage stub. I went outside into the sunshine and took another cab to the designated used-car lot where I found the pink 1956 Ford with the radio aerial sticking up from near the windshield on the right front.

I purchased the Ford and immediately experienced carburetor trouble. Turning into a certain garage I got immediate service from a mechanic who was medium-statured and could easily have passed for the Bureau operator I'd watched blown to pieces in a film. He worked on the carburetor and decided on a test run with me driving.

We were three blocks from the garage before he asked in perfect English, "The suitcase?"

"Back seat."

There was something incongruous and humorous about watching the world's master spy crawl over the back of a front seat of a dented used car and disappear onto the floor. But I didn't laugh.

When he had crawled back beside me again, he wore a white shirt, tie, and business suit. He directed me to a public parking lot where we vacated the Ford and walked a half block across the lot before climbing into a new station wagon with a key in the ignition switch and a full tank of gas when I turned on the switch.

We drove almost a mile before he asked, "Are we being followed?"

"No."

"Good."

He settled in the seat and told me how to get to our destination.

It was two hours out of the city. The country was open and rolling, patched by clusters of trees. We traveled in silence until we approached a graveled side road, and my passenger told me to turn. I drove almost six miles down the road before he said, "The trees ahead on the right. Turn into them, please."

I did and found a wide, grassed area, heavily shadowed. I let the station wagon roll to a stop. My passenger debarked and moved immediately into the brush ahead

of us. I trailed him. We stopped on the edge of the cluster. Ahead, for as far as I could see, were gently rolling, fenced fields.

Der Doktor produced a package of cigarettes and his first smile. "You are efficient, Frank."

"Thanks." I took one of the offered cigarettes.

He held a match flame for me and then we squatted side by side at the edge of the tree patch. "We will be joined by others. Do not be alarmed," he said.

I started to say something in reply, but he shook his head. "I must organize my thoughts now. Please do not interrupt."

And so we squatted there for ten minutes in silence, smoking, discarding the butts, staring out on the rolling fields while he organized his thoughts and I wondered how such a nondescript little guy could become the world's most accomplished master spy. I didn't move until I heard the car roll into the grove behind us.

"Do not be disturbed, my friend," *Der Doktor* said in a soft voice. "It is Bruno and Hilda."

But only a man joined us. I recognied him from the photograph Rita Paton had in her possession.

Der Doktor strode toward him with his shoulders squared. "Where is Hilda?" He sounded as disturbed as Bruno looked.

"I thought she would be here," Bruno said. "She went to a hairdresser this morning." He paused, frowned deeply and then continued quickly, "You know how she is, sir. Hilda must be fashionably presentable for all occasions. She—"

Der Doktor's voice was drowned out by the sudden chopping sound that filled our ears. We turned simultaneously and watched the large, unmarked helicopter approach. It looked cumbersome in the air, but it settled on the rolling field as if it had been a pigeon feather drifting slowly to the ground.

We didn't know the woman was with us until she emerged abruptly from the heavy foliage screen a little to the right of Bruno's car. She was almost instantly at *Der Doktor's* side, a Hilda quite unlike the bovine, flat-faced woman I had seen in a photograph that I had memorized with painstaking care. She was visibly shaken and her pallor was pronounced.

"I am being followed," she warned. "We must hurry!"

I had the .38 in my fist and Bruno had already started back through the trees with a .45 when *Der Doktor* snapped, "We board. Quickly."

We ran to the coptor. The wind from the whirring blades whipped us as we climbed, single file, into the bulbous belly of the plane. I was last. A young man in an Army uniform pulled the heavy door shut. And then, suddenly, we were airborne.

The copter was the troop carrier type. A slab bench lined each wall of the barren interior. *Der Doktor* sat spread-legged on the slab to my right.

"Our rendezvous, Frank, is a ship in Lake Michigan," he said informatively. "There is no danger now."

I followed the Army guy up front. He slid into a seat beside a busy pilot and slipped on headphones. Neither paid any attention to me as I stared out the window. Dust hung over the graveled road, but I couldn't find a car.

I was just starting to turn from the window when a tiny figure far below burst from the clump of trees into the open, stooped, whisked a dress over her head and waved it as if she were warning off a fast moving train catapulting toward certain disaster.

Had Rita Paton gone out of her mind?

I went back into the huge belly of the copter and discovered she hadn't. Somone had visited unit 7-A at the Sunshine Motel.

Hilda sat at the far end of the passenger compartment, her blonde hair freshly coiffured, her wide, flat face blank. A large purse was open on her lap and she held a small gun in her left hand. It moved slowly, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, from me to *Der Doktor* and back again.

"Doktor?" she said.

He rattled something in German I didn't get the gist of.

She laughed flatly and stood up. Her face was hard. "You and the American will please come to me?"

Neither of us moved. I shot him a glance. He was staring at the woman, but you couldn't tell what was passing through his mind.

"Come!"

Der Doktor got to his feet. I moved up beside him.

"Remain," she said without looking at me. "It is—"

The rest of it was cut off as the copter dipped suddenly. The tail dropped as if it had been caught in a violent down draft. I pitched forward, forced to run to keep from sprawling and saw Hilda stumbling back, the gun suddenly pointed toward the ceiling.

I heard the roar of the shot just before I slammed into her. We crashed into the back wall. She screamed an oath in German. And then I had her gun wrist. I snapped it down across my knee and the gun flipped from her fingers.

I caught the front of her dress and pinned her against the wall. But the copter dipped forward and we were reeling together. I saw the sprawled *Doktor*. He was coming up from the floor. Bruno was kneeling beside him with the .45 in his hand.

We hit them, spun off, pitched and slammed into something hard. I heard the cracking sound and was suddenly on my back with a violent roar filling my ears. Hilda

sprawled on top of me, the wind whipping my head about as if it was a gymnasium punching bag.

It was a few seconds before I realized that we had been flung back against the door of the copter. The door had popped off, and now I was sprawled on my back with my head and shoulders outside and a wide-eyed, wriggling Hilda on top of me. But in those seconds I also remembered what Rita Paton had conveyed to me when she had whisked off the dress.

I knew what I had to do, and I propped my hands against the German woman's stomach and heaved. Her rattling scream of terror drifted away quickly as she plummeted, turning over and over, down to the lake water.

"It was the only thing to do," *Der Doktor* said peremptorily after he and Bruno had yanked me back inside the copter. His face was blank. "We can not have interference of any kind."

The pilot was staring back at us, his face drained of all color.

I WAS NOT allowed to see those in civilian clothes aboard the Navy vessel. I was escorted aft by a ramrod-straight junior officer, while *Der Doktor* and Bruno were whisked below deck. The junior officer suggested I might enjoy the sunshine. Normally I would have. Today I didn't.

I attempted to find solace in the thought that Hilda had killed an agent—or, at least, had been an accomplice in murder, possibly had even ordered his death. I propped my forearms against a railing and stared at the blue-green water, wondering when it would give up her body.

A very young seaman offered me a cigarette. I smoked it and listened to his reminiscences of an Iowa farm.

The sun was low in the western sky, behind the city, when the copter set down on the minute airstrip bordering Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. It was the pilot who placed the steps for us. *Der Doktor* and Bruno departed immediately. I looked at the pilot steadily for a moment. He was young, probably not more than twenty-three. From the expression on his face, you might have thought he had just returned from a routine jaunt to obtain flying hours.

I stuck out a hand. "Thanks."

His grip was firm. "My orders were to get you there, sir."

I went down the steps and hailed a cab.

Rita Paton, freshly showered, was waiting for me when I arrived at the Sunshine Motel.

"I wasn't sure you'd get the message," she said, after I'd filled her in.

"I never miss a message, honey," I said, drawing her into my arms. "It's one of my long suits."

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THE RING OF TRUTH

To Professor Kitteridge truth walked hand-in-hand with the sternest kind of self-righteousness. So the bell tolled for him alone when tragedy struck.

by HENRY SLESAR

AS THE HOUR approached nine, Professor Douglas Kitteridge drew the attention of the party's newest arrivals—the publisher Harold Pryor and his wife—who hadn't yet heard the famous clocktower bells or the story that went with them. The rest of the guests knew all about them, through direct, ear-splitting experience, but nobody minded hearing the Professor tell the story again.

"Have you wondered about this house, Harold?" Kitteridge said, tugging at his gray spade of a beard. "About how a retired professor maintains it on a modest pension and those miserable royalties you pay me?"

The publisher had been wondering nothing of the kind, but he smiled pleasantly. It was a good enough house, but it was too barnlike for comfort, and it was stuck onto the side of some public building.

"Our neighbor," Kitteridge said, "is the Town Hall of Rushford. Some years ago, a grateful

ex-townsman—grateful to be out of here, perhaps—made it the gift of a magnificent clock that tolled the hours. But while the sound of the bell was soft and melodious for miles about, to the resident of this house, it was like living with the clapper itself.

"The poor man—his name was Jennings—finally put the house up for sale, at a price even college professors could afford. And as you know," Kitteridge said, touching the cord of his hearing aid, "I have a certain advantage over other people. I can be deaf when I choose to be."

He waited for Pryor's dry chuckle, and then went to Lorna's side. His daughter smiled up at him, with the lovely mouth of his wife and his own wide, serene eyes.

"Of course, Lorna had something to say about it. It would be her home, too, and she's not deaf." He tweaked an ear affectionately. "But she fell in love with the place, bells and all."

"Don't believe him," the girl said. "Daddy knew I was going to study abroad, and after that, I'd probably—" She stopped and caught the eye of Mark Dixon, who seemed disinclined to hear the end of her sentence.

Mark got up and went to refurbish his drink, moving stiffly. He was tall, ungainly when he was ill at ease or angry or both.

Lorna frowned unhappily, knowing the cause of his mood, but Mrs. Pryor was saying: "It's almost nine now. Should we cover our ears?"

"What?" Kitteridge said, in mock horror. "And miss the lovely sound? It's like hearing the bells of truth, ringing out the way Tennyson heard them! Listen, listen!"

Bong, went the tower bell, and the Professor, waving his arm with excitement, said, "Ring out the old, ring in the new!" *Bong.* "Ring in the nobler modes of life, with sweeter manners, purer laws!" *Bong.* "Ring out the narrowing lust of gold, ring out the thousand wars of old!" *Bong.* "Ring in the thousand years of peace!" *Bong.* "Ring in the valiant man and free, the larger heart, the kindlier hand!" *Bong.* "Ring out the darkness of the land—ring in the Christ that is to be!"

Bong, bong, bong, went the clocktower bells.

There was strain on the faces of the Pryors when the ordeal was over, but everyone else seemed relaxed. Kitteridge looked fatigued by his performance, and muttered something about a drink, a need fulfilled at once by Lorna. Then she picked up a pair of overflowing ashtrays and slipped quickly past Mark Dixon on her way out.

"Kitchen!" she whispered at him. He obviously understood the command; a minute later, he

came through the swinging door and joined her at the sink.

At first, she refused the kiss he offered, then changed her mind and enjoyed herself. Still in his arms, she said: "You've got that pained look again, Mark. For heaven's sake, get used to Daddy's bell story. I had to."

"Tell you the truth," he said glumly, "I think the only reason you're marrying me is to get away from the damn things." He creased his forehead. "You are marrying me, Lorna, aren't you? It wasn't something I dreamt?"

"I'm marrying you. I know it seems like a long time since we talked about it. But you know about Daddy—"

"Yes, I know more about Daddy than I know about you. We talk about him more than we talk about our own future."

"Mark!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they don't use a Bible at our wedding. Just a copy of his newest book."

She broke loose, a strong girl expressing anger. Mark rubbed his arm ruefully, and gave her the shy smile she liked so much. Its charms failed this time.

"You've developed this perfectly spiteful dislike of my father—"

"Look, I don't have any dislike for him. How could I? Your father's a great man, I know that as well as anybody."

"You do?"

"Of course. He's a great scholar. He's also a man of ideals, the Albert Schweitzer of New England. I'm only a poor schnook of a real-estate man, but I know that. And I'm perfectly willing to put up with him for your sake."

"Put *up* with him?" she gasped. "How can you say such a thing?"

"Oh, it'll be a burden, all right. A crass, materialistic guy like me, marrying into all that saintliness. But what can I do? I'm stuck on you."

"What an idiot you are!" Lorna said, but going into his arms again. "All right, I'll talk to Daddy, the minute everybody leaves. Not that he hasn't guessed already. He may be hard of hearing, but he has eyes."

He looked at her seriously. "He won't be happy, Lorna. He won't want to lose you."

"It has to happen some day, he knows that."

"Then tell him the day's come. Tell him the truth."

She put her face against his shoulder. "I always tell Daddy the truth," she said.

BUT IT WAS harder than Lorna thought.

There was something forlorn about Kitteridge once the party noises had subsided and the clock-tower bells were stilled until morning. He was a smallish man, with dapper figure in a well-tailored smoking jacket. He was a bit vain

of that figure, of his well-trimmed beard. That, a tendency to gout that he refused to acknowledge, and an excess of loving dependence on his daughter, were the only complaints Lorna could lodge against him.

Mark had been right: he was a great man. Kitteridge was a Shakespearian scholar whose reputation swelled with distance. In the village of Rushford, he was respected. In universities, he was a recognized authority. Abroad, he was revered. To his daughter, motherless when she was five, he was the source of all warmth and security, and something she now thought more important: the ideals of truth and beauty that he had spoon-fed her from childhood.

He looked blank when she made her announcement. "Marriage?" And it sounded like a foreign word. "I knew you liked Mark, of course, Lorna, but—"

"You must have known more than that, Daddy. If it was just a case of—liking, I wouldn't have seen him so much."

Kitteridge fingered his hearing aid, as if wanting to shut off the sound of the conversation. Then he smiled.

"What an old fraud I'm getting to be," he said. "I was about to say that the thought never crossed my mind. It's just that I never supposed you'd want to marry now. I mean before your doctorate, before you'd done all those things we planned to do together."

"Marriage wouldn't put an end to all our plans," Lorna said. "As for your lecture tour—"

"I don't know if I'd want to go without you. I'm getting a little old to gallivant around Europe by myself."

"But Mark and I could go, too, couldn't we?"

"Have you asked Mark about it? He' a business man. Can he just drop everything, because I have some speeches to make?"

"No," Lorna said miserably. "But he knows I can't simply—abandon you. I'm not that heartless."

"That's the last word I'd use about you." her father said. He came to her side, and rested a hand on her shoulder. "I know your heart only too well, darling. I know what a tender, beating little thing it is. I've always been afraid of the man who would trap it someday."

"If you only knew Mark better! He's not a scholar, but—"

"I'm not saying anything against Mark," Kitteridge said, and smiled bleakly. "I'd feel this way about any man—like the tired old King in the fairy tale, forced by the condition of his kingdom to give the hand of his Princess to a commoner."

She touched his hand, her fingers curling around his like a child's.

BRUNO'S was a bad place for the conversation Lorna had in mind. It was Rushford's idea of a cocktail lounge, with bad ventilation and garish lighting. But Mark liked it, mostly for its faults, and it was in a padded imitation-leather booth, facing the bubbling red lights of a juke box, that she told him her decision.

"It won't even be six months," she said. "By that time, I'll either have my doctorate or I won't, and Daddy's lecture tour will be over."

Mark gulped down his third drink of the night and signalled for a fourth, without asking Lorna to join him.

"All right, that's enough of the silent treatment," she said peevishly. "I can tell exactly what you're thinking, Mark, so you might as well say it out loud."

"Why, I wasn't thinking a thing," he said, twirling an empty glass. "Except how lucky you are, to have a father like that. Now you take my old man. Good old Charlie Dixon, Real Estate. I don't think he ever heard of an Ethic or an Ideal. He could lie and cheat with the best of 'em, Charlie could. I guess that's why I turned out so badly."

"You're drinking too much. You always do that when you're angry, Mark."

"Just another flaw in my character," he said, and grinned. "Hardly noticeable in the general ruin of my personality." His

fourth drink arrived, and was gone almost as quickly.

"You won't try and understand. It's not you Daddy objects to. I could marry you first thing tomorrow—"

"But you won't marry me tomorrow, will you?" He lifted his hand to the bartender.

"Mark, you're not having another drink?"

"You answer my question first."

Lorna looked at the moist circles on the table top.

"No, Mark, I couldn't do that."

Mark had the drink, and then suggested they leave.

She hadn't wanted him to drive, but there wasn't much choice. Lorna had gotten her license that year, but it extended only to automatic transmission, and Mark preferred a stick-shift sports job with a noisy motor.

From the moment they pulled away from Bruno's parking lot, she could tell that his belligerent mood would make for belligerent driving, and began to voice her warnings early. Mark didn't listen, of course. It was late, a light rain was falling, and the roadways around Rushford were lightly trafficked.

It was his own way of declaring his temper to the world, making the engine growl as he pushed it to the upper limits, despite Lorna's pleas for caution.

He was cutting across Ridge Road, shortening the drive home by a mile, when he struck and killed the thin woman in the polka-dot housecoat. There wasn't any doubt that she was dead, no hurry to climb out of the car and see if her injuries could be treated.

The car, traveling at high speed, hit her with such stunning force that she was lifted into the air and flung up against the windshield, her face smashing bloodily into the glass. She landed like a broken manikin in the ditch beside her own mailbox, its door open, the flag up, the undelivered letters still hanging over the edge.

Miraculously, neither of the people in the car were hurt; seat belts held them firmly when the jolt came. Mark, his fingers numb, could barely unbuckle his in order to get out of the car. Lorna didn't want to leave at all; she covered her face and her body shook with cold.

"Lorna," she heard Mark say. "Lorna, the woman's dead. I'll have to tell someone." She saw his pale, questioning face. "Should I go into the house, Lorna?" he said pitifully. "Tell me what to do."

She didn't recall answering, but Mark finally found his wits. He went into the woman's house, and telephoned the police. There was a child, about ten, who had been sleeping on the upper floor. He came to the landing and stared sleepily at the strange man using the telephone.

The police knew Mark Dixon, of course. His father had been the leading real estate broker of Rushford, and Mark was its heir. They knew Lorna Kitteridge. They knew less about Anna Moger, the widow who had been killed, orphaning her son Ronald. She had moved to Rushford a year ago, buying the small house with insurance. The neighbors hardly knew her; they would never get the chance now.

In the Moger living room, while grimmer things were being done outside, the police talked to Dixon.

"No," he said. "I didn't see her. She just walked out into the road. I think she had just mailed some letters or something. I don't know why she did such a stupid thing. She must have heard my car. It's got a loud engine."

"And how fast were you going?" the ranking officer, Sergeant McKeon, asked.

Mark's hand touched something on the sofa, a soft bundle of knitting, the needles still buried in the wool. He looked at Lorna on the other side of the room.

"Not more than thirty-five," he said. "She *must* have heard me coming. Maybe she thought she could beat me across the road."

"People do funny things," McKeon said helpfully. He turned to Lorna, and Mark tightened his jaw. "Are you all right, Miss Kitteridge? Would you like some coffee?"

"No," Lorna shivered. "Nothing, thank you."

"There'll have to be an inquest, of course," McKeon said. "You understand that, Mr. Dixon?"

"Yes, naturally. I can't tell you how rotten I feel about this."

"It's a rotten situation all around," the Sergeant said. "But no use making it worse than it is. You folks would be better off home."

"Home," Lorna said to herself.

PROFESSOR KITTERIDGE was asleep when she arrived, or pretending to be. A year ago, when Lorna had attained the independent age of twenty-one, he had made a practice of ignoring her homecoming hours. It was an effort to wake him, not to cry out the dreadful story and find comfort in his arms. But she went to bed, struggled against sleep, and then slipped into the realm of nightmare; woke up screaming for him.

"Lorna, Lorna, darling!" he said soothingly. "It's all right, whatever it is."

She sobbed out the story, grateful for his presence, for the bulwark of his shoulders.

It was in the morning, a day cynically filled with sunshine, that she told him the rest, the part that troubled her more than the physical horror she had experienced.

"It was my fault that Mark drank so much," she said. "He really doesn't like whiskey, the taste of it. But I was telling him how I felt, about getting married after the European trip."

"Your fault?" Kitteridge said gently. "That's a debatable interpretation, darling."

"Anyway, he drank—a lot. Too much. He was driving crazily, recklessly. He must have been going fifty-five or sixty, in a forty-mile zone, when he hit that woman."

Professor Kitteridge kept his silence.

"The police knew Mark. I

guess that's why they didn't ask him about drinking."

"No sobriety test?"

"Nobody even suggested it. I don't suppose Mark seemed to be drunk at all—not after it happened. It was terribly sobering. But he didn't mention the drinks he had, he didn't—" She gave him an agonized stare. "He didn't tell the truth about his speed. He said he was going thirty-five miles an hour. It wasn't true, Daddy."

"Of course, he was overwrought. At a time like that—"

"Yes, he must have been. But he knew what he was saying, he knew what it could mean if he told the truth. It would be a crime then, wouldn't it?"

Kitteridge said: "Vehicular homicide, I think they call it."

"Could he go to prison?"

"Perhaps."

Her father paced the floor a moment, as if pondering the next question.

"And what did you say, Lorna? When the police talked to you about the accident?"

"But they didn't. They didn't ask me anything, Daddy. They said there would be an inquest to determine the facts. I suppose I'd have to answer questions then."

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

Her eyes began to brim.

"Daddy, I couldn't do it! I couldn't face all those people—not after last night. I won't be able to do it!"

"Do what, Lorna? Tell them what you know?"

"If you could have seen Mark's face! He was like a child, like a little boy afraid to be punished. He said, 'You'll stand by me, Lorna, won't you?' "

"What did he mean by that?"

"He wants me to corroborate his story—about how fast he was driving. Not to say anything about the drinks he had."

"But the bartender at Bruno's—"

"Mark says Bruno will be circumspect. They don't like that kind of trouble, because their license position is too shaky. He knows they'll keep quiet, that he'll be all right if only I—"

"If you lie for him, Lorna?"

"Daddy, I love Mark! I'm going in to marry him!"

"Ah," Kitteridge said.

"The woman's dead! Nothing will bring her back now. Lies, truth, nothing! Who does it help if Mark goes to prison?"

"Of course, darling, you're right. There's no profit in truth here, none at all."

She watched him warily.

"Then you agree with me, Daddy? You really do? I was afraid you might not."

"No profit, Lorna. Only loss, maybe. But that's something you'll have to judge for yourself, the extent of that loss. You know how I feel about the truth, what I've always taught you about it."

She turned her face away, her lips tremulous.

"Yes," she said, and quoted bitterly: *"'Dare to be true; nothing can need a lie; a fault which needs it most, grows two thereby?"*

"You used to like that poem," her father said. "You never spoke those lines that way before. With contempt."

"No, Daddy! Not contempt. Only—listen! I don't have to really lie about what happened, do I? There are ways to avoid lies and truth both, aren't there? I don't have to tell them if Mark was drunk—that's a subjective fact anyway. I don't have to say he was driving too fast when they ask me. I can just—"

"Lorna!"

His voice was harsh and uncompromising. "Do what you want to do, Lorna. You're an adult now, independent of me, independent of even my worn-out ideas. Lie to everybody, lie if you like. But don't look for my approval."

"But, Daddy—"

"Understand me, Lorna! Your mind is your own. Don't ask for my blessing!"

He walked out, leaving her to herself.

A moment later the clocktower bell struck, beginning its count of the hours. She looked up, startled, as if at an unexpected voice, a tortured expression on her face.

THE OFFICIAL inquiry into the accidental death of Anna Moger of Ridge Road was conducted at the County Court House in Oakmont, four miles from the village of Rushford. It was held on a Wednesday morning at ten, but the day and hour didn't seem to discourage a fair number of citizens from attending.

Judge Arthur Driscoll, who presided at the hearing, credited the turnout to his friend, Professor Kitteridge, and the possibility of exposing some minor scandal connected with his daughter. The town's respect for the Professor didn't preclude the desire to see him taken down a peg or two.

By eleven o'clock, the testimony was making the audience restless. Sergeant Joe McKeon had given a lengthy account of the accident, including a detailed catalog of the dead woman's injuries. Then Judge Driscoll asked two questions which alerted the interest of the crowd. The first was:

"Sergeant McKeon, was any investigation made of the skid marks at the scene of the accident, with a view to determining the speed of the vehicle?"

The Sergeant didn't look uncomfortable when he said: "No, sir, there wasn't. The condition of the road, and the light rain we had that night, made it impossible to tell the difference between the skid marks and tire treads. That's why no measurement was made."

The Judge frowned at this, but continued with: "It's been stated that the driver of the vehicle, Mark Dixon, had left the establishment called Bruno's shortly before the accident. Since Bruno's is in the business of serving hard liquors, did the police give Mr. Dixon a sobriety test?"

"No, sir, we didn't."

There was an outbreak of chair-creaking in the room.

"You see, sir," McKeon said, "we didn't know at the time where Mr. Dixon had come from. All we knew was that Mrs. Moger was dead, and Mr. Dixon certainly didn't appear like he'd been drinking. He looked sober as a judge to me."

Judge Driscoll grunted soberly.

Then Mark Dixon told his own story.

"Yes, we left Bruno's—Miss Kitteridge and myself—about half an hour before the accident. I had one drink, a whisky sour. You can ask Mr. Bruno about that, because he served me."

The owner-bartender, in the second row, shifted the topcoat from one side of his lap to the other. From his saintly expression, there was no doubt that he would corroborate.

"When I reached Route twenty-four, I decided to take the Ridge Road short cut to town. I was traveling from thirty to thirty-five miles an hour, and I remember slowing down when the rain started. I had my wipers going when I came over the rise of the hill, so my glass was clear. But I still didn't see Mrs. Moger when she stepped out into the road directly in front of the car.

"It happened like lightning, the way she crashed into the windshield. I put on the brake immediately, but of course it was too late." He put his fist to his mouth, and stared at the floor with eyes tragic with regret.

In the front row, Professor Kitteridge broke the courtroom mood with a dry, mundane cough. It seemed to snap Judge Driscoll out of a lethargy, too. He said: "Will

Miss Lorna Kitteridge take the chair, please?"

It was, of course, what the crowd had been waiting for. That pretty Kitteridge girl (but awful pale-looking, isn't she?) not more than a year out of college, and drinking in roadhouses.

They craned their necks for a good look at the famous man's daughter, who obeyed the judge's instruction slowly.

"Miss Kitteridge, you were with Mr. Dixon on the night of the accident?"

"Yes." Even the one-word answer seemed to be a strain.

"About what time did you arrive at Bruno's?"

"About nine. We left just after ten."

"And did you have a drink that night?"

"Yes," the girl said. "I had a whisky sour."

"The same as Mr. Dixon."

"Yes." She found herself impaled by Mark's eyes, but couldn't turn away.

"When Mr. Dixon's car approached Mrs. Moger's driveway, did you see the lady before the automobile struck her?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't know a thing until after the impact, when she smashed up against the windshield. Even then I wasn't really sure what had happened, it was too incomprehensible."

"Were you aware of the speed you were traveling?"

Mark's eyes still held her. But now she broke the link that joined them.

"I'm not sure of the exact speed," she said.

"Would you estimate it?" the Judge said carefully. "Mr. Dixon thinks it was between thirty and thirty-five. Do you agree with that?"

Only a small muscle flickered in her father's face. His head moved up only a trifle, yet his gray spade of a beard seemed to jut out fiercely.

"No," Lorna whispered. "It couldn't have been that. It was more like fifty, or fifty-five."

The collective gasp from the crowd seemed to emerge only from Mark's opened mouth.

"Fifty-five? Miss Kitteridge, I hope you've considered this reply."

"Yes," she said dully. "I've considered it. We were traveling at least that. I'd been looking at the speedometer only a few moments before. I was complaining to Mark about his speed. But he wouldn't listen to me. He wasn't in any mood to listen. He was angry and he was drunk."

"Lorna!" It was neither a cry of rage nor a wail of protest. Mark simply stood up and shouted her name.

"It's the truth, the truth!" Lorna sobbed. "I can't help myself! He was drinking. He had five drinks and he was drunk! He drove like

a madman, no matter how I tried to stop him. He never thought that woman would be on the road that time of night—but he wouldn't listen!

There was no gavel by the judge's side; he hadn't thought one would be necessary at the hearing, but he needed it now to silence the unruly crowd. McKeon, a man with a bull-like voice, did his best to quiet them, but the disorder was almost total.

Kitteridge, not caring a hang for court etiquette, went quickly to the stand and cradled his sobbing daughter in his arms. Only Mark Dixon seemed unaffected by the excitement. He stood rooted to the place where he was standing, his features fixed in an expression he would wear from one courtroom to the next.

LORNA KITTERIDGE saw him only once more before the actual trial. The meeting took place accidentally, in a corridor outside the law offices of Grierson & Moore, the attorney's handling Mark's defense.

For one moment, the sullen resentment he had felt towards Lorna since the hearing dissolved at the sight of her. He almost took her in his arms, but Professor Kitteridge was there, too, and the sight of his disapproving gray eyes discouraged him.

"Lorna, could I talk to you alone, for just a minute?"

She looked at her father, who said: "Now listen, Mark, I know just how you feel about all this."

"I'd rather say what I have to say to Lorna, Professor Kitteridge."

He was given the chance, but Kitteridge didn't move very far away.

Mark lowered his voice, and said: "For God's sake, Lorna, how could you have done it?"

She didn't answer him.

"You know what they're saying, don't you? The damned town gossips? They're saying we had some kind of fight, a lover's quarrel, and that you wanted to hurt me."

"You know that's not so, Mark!"

"Yes, I know it! But the other explanation makes even less sense! That you just—had to—tell the truth!"

"It wasn't easy for me. Lies would have been easier."

"One small lie! That was all you had to say. Are you so afraid of Hell you wouldn't lie for me?"

"I can't expect you to understand!"

"But I do understand. Better than you do, maybe. It was his idea, wasn't it. That brave show in the courtroom. Professor Kitteridge's little girl—she always tells the truth!"

"Please, Mark!"

He took a grip on her arms, the gesture bringing Kitteridge to at-

tention. But the old man didn't come forward; he waited to see what would happen next.

"He told you to tell the truth, didn't he? He got his friend, the Judge, to question you. He gave you a lot of high-flown ethical reasons for telling the truth, nothing but the truth! Every reason but the real one."

"I made up my own mind! I can't lie, Mark, not for you, not for anyone. I thought I could, but I was wrong."

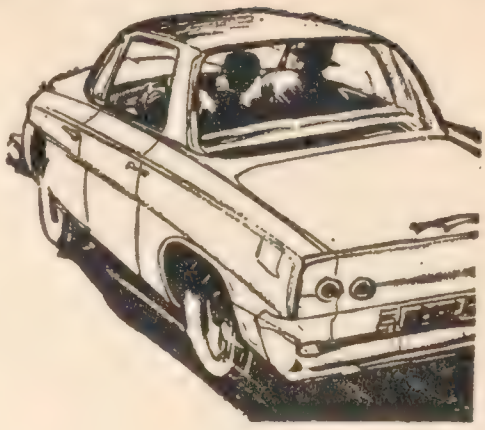
"Your father knew what would happen! It would split us apart! And that's what he really wanted, Lorna. That's the truth he didn't tell you about!"

He didn't seem aware that he had started shaking her. Now he let her go, and on her release she turned and ran down the corridor.

The trial lasted four days, and Mark Dixon was found guilty of the charge of vehicular homicide. The sentence pronounced called for a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment. The jovial partners of Grierson & Moore promised their client an immediate appeal, and assured him that even if the appeal failed the nature of the crime was such that his early pardon was certain.

But six months later, Mark Dixon still wore prison garb.

PROFESSOR KITTERIDGE lived those six months in a confinement of his own. His goutish leg worsened, and he was forced to hobble around with a cane. Reluctantly, he had cancelled his European tour, at a cost to his ego and his purse, but not only because of gout.



Lorna's health was impaired, too. She wasn't really sick. Her clinical symptoms were few. It was the sort of continuing gray ailment that people called 'run-down.' He knew the indisposition was emotional, and so did she, but neither one suggested the kind of treatment that was obviously called for.

Kitteridge had nothing against psychiatry. He had once written a clever book on the subject of Shakespeare and Freud, but the idea of subjecting Lorna to the process was repellent. What she needed was a little forgetfulness. She had to stop feeling guilty about Mark Dixon. She had to meet life on new terms.

She had made only one attempt

to see Mark in prison, an offer that was rejected flatly, almost violently. There had been only one letter from him, a brief, abrasive document he had written during his third week in jail. He made it brutally clear that he wanted neither her visits nor her sympathies. He wished her continuing happiness with her high-minded parent and complimented her on the nobility of her character.

On the day she received the letter, Lorna cried for the first and only time since the trial.

At the end of that grim half-year, Professor Kitteridge asked Judge Arthur Driscoll if a prisoner could be compelled to see a visitor. The Judge believed that it was not without precedent, under certain circumstances. That was how Kitteridge arranged to see Mark Dixon.

At first, Mark glowered at the sight of the Professor's dapper figure, and refused to advance towards the screened partition that separated the prisoner and visitor benches. Then he shrugged, and sat down.

"It appears that I have no rights," he said dryly. "Even after all this time, Professor, a man can't forget what it's like to make his own decision about what he does, or who he sees."

"This is a special case," Kitteridge said. "A matter of health."

"Whose health?"

"Lorna's."

There wasn't a flicker. Mark said: "I suppose she's pining away for me, is that it? Well, my nights are filled with sweet dreams, Professor, and she's in one of them. You tell her that for me."

"I want you to see her, Mark."

Mark smiled. "I wouldn't force that issue, Professor Kitteridge. I don't have anything nice to say to your daughter."

"Mark, you've misunderstood Lorna. I couldn't expect you to applaud what she did in court. But if you really thought about it, about the ideals that motivated her—"

"Whose ideals? Yours or hers?"

"Do I have to separate them?"

"Yes!" Mark said fiercely. "But you can't, Professor! She's your Monster. You've got her all twisted up between her ethics and her instincts. I suppose you're proud of the result, but it's a transparent fake."

Kitteridge drew himself up. "There's nothing fake about Lorna. Her principles—"

"She may think she has principles! But all she really has is you, Professor—her shining example. She wants you to love and admire her, so she acts the way you want her to act. Daddy's little girl—always tells the truth!"

"Yes," Kitteridge said stiffly. "Yes, she does."

"And her father? What about him?"

"I abominate lies."

"You won't even lie to yourself,

will you? Then tell me this. Weren't you happy when Lorna and I broke up? Didn't it save your happy home?"

The Professor stood up. "I can see that my coming here was a mistake, Mark. I'm sorry."

"You're a hypocrite!" Mark shouted. "The whole damned thing's your fault, Kitteridge! That's the real truth. It's your fault!"

He was still shouting after his visitor had gone.

MARK DIXON was discharged from prison one year and three weeks from the day he entered. The word spread quickly about the town of Rushford, and there was an air of expectancy among the people who knew him, a mood peaked with the arrival of every train.

But Mark Dixon didn't come home. For over two months there was no word from him or about him.

Then Mark's name came up, on the lips of Harold Pryor. The publisher had come to call on Professor Kitteridge to discuss the annotation of a new Shakespeare edition, and during a pause in the talk, he said: "You know, somebody's been asking a great many questions about you, Douglas."

"Questions? Who's doing that?"

"That fellow Dixon—the one who had that automobile accident. He was talking to Merrit-Hobbs for one, those people who used to publish your first books. And to members of my own staff. He even tried to get an appointment to see me, but I put him off."

Kitteridge, troubled, pulled at his beard.

"What do you suppose he wants? He's an embittered young man, you know."

"I spoke to George Merrit. He didn't know about—well, about Lorna and this Dixon. He thought Dixon was an article-writer looking for biographical material. George said that he seemed to know an awful lot about you already, Douglas."

The Professor grunted. "I'm sure he does. And I don't much like the idea of someone like that snooping into my life."

"Why do you think he's doing it?"

"It's hard to say. Rancor, I suppose. Hopes he can find something unpleasant in my past."

Pryor chuckled. "Do you think he'll have any luck?"

Kitteridge frowned angrily at the proposed dust-jacket in his hand.

"This is pretty damned gaudy for a Shakespeare edition, Harold, don't you think?"

He said nothing to his daughter about Pryor's news. He didn't like to talk about Mark Dixon: his was a ghost he had hoped to exorcise forever from his house.

But the spirit was persistent.

One day, Lorna came in from outdoors, carrying the day's mail, and brought him a small white envelope posted from New Haven.

"It's from Mark," she said tonelessly.

"You mean he has actually written?"

"The letter's addressed to you," she said.

He tore it open, and read the brief message swiftly. Lorna waited quietly, asking nothing.

"He doesn't say much," Kitteridge told her. "He'd like to pay me a call, on the ninth." His eyes went to the calendar. "That would be today. He doesn't say what he wants, only that he'd like to see me, about nine this evening."

To her credit, Lorna's face didn't change.

"I'd rather not be here," she said.

"Of course, you do as you like, darling. I don't expect a pleasant little chat, not after the last time we spoke, in prison— He stopped, suddenly recalling that he had never told her of his private call to Mark Dixon.

His daughter looked at him queerly, and he said: "I suppose I should have told you about that. I went to see Mark about six months ago. I asked Arthur Driscoll to make it possible."

"Why? Why did you do that, Daddy?"

"I really don't know. It was highly unrewarding."

"You did it for my sake. You were trying to get him to—understand me."

"I did what I thought was right, Lorna."

"Of course!"

"Lorna, Mark has always blamed me for what you did in court, I suppose you realize that. He couldn't admit that it was your own love of truth."

"My love of truth?" She laughed, and the harsh edge of the sound jarred him. "Daddy, you never understood me yourself, how were you going to explain me to somebody else? I didn't love truth. I loved Mark!"

"You did what you had to do! What your conscience told you to do!" He took a slow step forward, and stretched his hand towards her. "Lorna! I thought we'd agreed to drop this tired old subject."

"My conscience?" she said softly. "Is that what I was satisfying, Daddy? That small little voice inside me?"

"It can be a loud voice, darling, a very compelling voice!"

"But I still hear it!" she cried. "It's still talking to me! And do you know what it's saying? 'You fool! You fool! *You fool!*'"

He wasn't prepared for the explosion of her tears, or her quick retreat from the room. He stared vacantly at the place where she had been, and then crumpled Mark Dixon's letter in his hand.

HE DIDN'T care where Lorna chose to spend the evening: at a friend's house, the movies—anywhere but the place where Mark Dixon had decided to make his first appearance in Rushford.

The doorbell sounded at nine-forty, and Kitteridge, whose leg throbbed with uncommon ferociousness that night, went to the door leaning heavily on his cane. It was an effort of will just to turn the knob.

Mark had changed. It was a fact to be expected, but the Professor was surprised. The short prison term had cost him something in flesh, in color, in the luster of his eyes. There were more hollows in his face, and his lips described a firmer line. But he sounded normal enough, almost like the old Mark.

"It's nice of you to see me, Professor. I wasn't sure of my reception—after the last time."

"Come in," Kitteridge said briskly. "I hope you weren't expecting to see Lorna, because she's not here."

"No," Mark said, "I didn't expect to see her."

They went into the living room, and Kitteridge, a responsible host, offered him a drink. Mark took a whisky on the rocks. He thanked him politely, inquired after his health, and they sat down.

"Well?" Kitteridge said. "Would you care to come to the point?"

"Yes," Mark said, "I'll come right to the point, Professor. I've come to see you about Truth."

The Professor made a weary sound.

"Don't misunderstand me," he said. "These—philosophical discussions are meat and drink to old campus fogeys like me. But I'm tired of that subject right now. Very tired of it."

The younger man grinned. "I'm exhausted by it myself. I've just spent two months in search of it, Professor—two long hard months. And I didn't know what I was looking for."

"You've been digging up things about me, haven't you?" Kitteridge rubbed the white ivory lion that adorned the head of his cane. "Well, I hope you enjoyed it."

"No," Mark said. "Not much, Professor. You see, I made the mistake of talking to your enemies. The publishers you dropped, the friends you no longer see, the scholars you had disputes with."

"And learned what?"

"Learned this. That your enemies didn't have the Truth I was looking for, Professor." He grinned wolfishly. "Only your friends had that. Like Avery Hays."

There was no way to conceal it. A man struck winces under the blow, and Kitteridge's face flashed the pain of his reaction.

Avery Hays!

"It was strange," Mark Dixon said, "how few people even remembered the poor man's name, even thought you dedicated the fourth—or was it the fifth?—book to him. George Merrit knew him, of course. Mr. Merrit called you his 'benefactor,' Professor. He said that Hays was an alcoholic that you took care of for many years."

"He was my friend," Kitteridge said hoarsely.

"Yes, he was a good friend, and you were good to him. That was one chapter of your past you had every reason to be proud of, wasn't it? I don't know why I got so curious about that insignificant man."

"Avery's been dead for ten years! What in hell did you want from him?"

"Why, nothing, Professor. I just thought a man like that deserved a little recognition, if only for his past association with you. So I talked to people who knew him, to his old pals, his family—he still has a brother alive, you know, a erotchety old fellow in the terminal ward at the County Hospital. His name is Ezra, perfect name for the old boy, and you know what? He still has the junk Avery

Hays left when he died. That pitiful collection of books and papers."

Kitteridge pushed himself up on his cane.

"You don't expect me to believe that, about Avery's papers. Avery never kept anything—not a thing. He was a foolish, drunken old—"

"But he was also brilliant, wasn't he? He went to the University on scholarship. You only beat him out for top honors because of his drinking."

"You're talking about forty years ago!"

"He was a drunk and he was dishonest, too, wasn't he? That was how he sustained that wild life of his, by selling his scholastic services to anybody who could pay for them!"

Kitteridge rubbed his leg, but the pains were widespread, in his chest and arms and back.

"I'm not feeling well, Mark," he said. "If you don't mind—"

"It wasn't so uncommon, Professor. It's probably the same today. That's what Avery said in his letter—the one he wrote to a woman named Jean. I don't know who Jean was, or why Avery never mailed the letter. But there it was. Avery said he was cleaning up, fifty, a hundred dollars a month, and would surely be able to pay back all he owed before the end of the semester. And then mentioned the thesis, the big job he was doing. He expected two hundred for that job alone. You know which thesis I mean, Professor?"

"Please, go," Kitteridge whispered. "I've heard enough of this terrible filth!"

"The Seven Secrets of Shakespeare," Mark said with a smile. "Sounds like a mystery story. But it was quite a piece of work, wasn't it? It became more than just a college thesis, didn't it? It became a world-famous book; it made a reputation. Your reputation, Professor."

"You liar!" Kitteridge cried.

Mark Dixon stood up. "Yes," he said softly. "That's just the subject under discussion, Professor. Truth and lies."

"Get out of here!"

"You paid Avery for that bit of work, and put your own name to it. You might have done as well yourself, but you were young and lazy and you had the money to pay for it. Then you discovered what you really had, and it was too late for both of you. You'd set your courses, inexorably."

"Mark!" Kitteridge said, in a ghastly voice. "Leave this house now! Get out of here!"

"I'm going, Professor, I'm going. I just wanted you to hear this little story about Truth. I thought you'd enjoy it. And also—to tell you this. *I have Avery Hays' letter."*

Overhead, reverberating through the house, the first bell of the clocktower began to toll the hour of ten. Mark Dixon grinned up at

the ceiling, and fingered his hat.

"Never send to know for whom the bell tolls," he said. "Is that how it goes, Professor?"

Bong!

Mark turned and went towards the door.

Bong! went the clocktower bell. Kitteridge, his eyes abnormally heated, stepped after him in two long strides. *Bong!* went the clocktower bell as he raised the ivory lion in the air and brought it crashing down against the young man's head. The blow only staggered Mark Dixon, and he stumbled as the bell went *bong!* once more.

Kitteridge struck again at Mark's temple, making the blood spurt over his forehead. *Bong!* went the clocktower bell as Mark dropped heavily to the carpet, his pupils rolling like loose bearings in the white field of his sightless eyes, and Kitteridge, enshrouded in that red, concealing mist where murder is done, took no chances and struck again; and *bong* went the bell of the clocktower.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

The mist cleared and he saw Lorna standing in the doorway, her eyes sweeping the room, aware of everything.

"Lorna," he whispered, as the clocktower bell struck again. "Lorna, thank God you're here! You saw what happened—what this crazy fool did—"

She came into the room and the bell sounded sonorously and she slapped her hands over her ears.

"Lorna, you saw what happened!" Kitteridge cried. "You know how Mark hated me! He deliberately attacked me."

Lorna brought her hands down slowly, staring at her father.

"He attacked me!" Kitteridge shouted, over the last note of the tolling bell. "He tried to kill me! That was why I did it, Lorna. That's why I hit him!"

He put his hands on her arms.

His daughter was moving her head, from side to side. She stepped backwards, out of his reach, shaking her head.

"No," she said bitterly. "No, Daddy. I saw what happened. You killed Mark. That's the truth. You always taught me to tell the truth. It's the only important thing—the truth!"

***Next Month*—A NEW *JOE RODRIQUEZ* THRILLER**

THE BIG KEY SUICIDES

By TOM H. MORIARTY

THE DEVIL'S PAYOFF

Sherdell had a secret, life-long contempt for the Law. But he lived in too much fear of it to commit a serious crime until . . .

by

NORMAN

HUNT

STEPHEN SHERDELL had always believed that honesty paid very poor dividends and it was perhaps only a fear of the law which had prevented him from putting that conviction to the test. But a fear can be completely out-weighed by circumstances of an unusual nature.

It started when he saw the man in the rumpled suit come into the bank one afternoon. The newcomer walked over to the cage closest to Sherdell and pushed across to the teller what looked like a scribbled note. At the same time he made ominous stroking movements with his left hand on something in his suit pocket that made a slight bulge. He received ten money packages and dropped them into a leather bag.

Nobody else seemed to notice. The bank guard wasn't anywhere in sight. Sherdell, who had come into the bank to cash one of his small weekly paychecks, automatically whirled on his heels. In seconds after the man in the rumpled suit had gone at a quick walk, Sherdell reached the entrance. He was breathing hard.

Rumpled Suit, with a glance around him, took one look at Sher-

dell's grimly determined face and ran. Sherdell followed, shouting a part of the time. He never knew how long he ran, nor did he have any idea if he had attracted anybody's attention.

He slowed down when Rumpled Suit paused in front of an apartment house. The look of grim determination in his eyes was even more pronounced now than when he had started out. Suddenly Sherdell became aware of thumping footsteps in back of him. Scowling, he swung about. A policeman and a group of passersby had joined the chase.

Rumpled Suit disappeared inside the building. Sherdell followed him up a dark flight of stairs, and through a door which he blocked with his shoe before it could be slammed shut. Breathing harshly, Sherdell passed through the door, locked it behind him and stumbled across the room until he stood in front of the dirt-encrusted fire-escape window. Dust hopscotched in front of his eyes.

"Give me that bag," Sherdell said quickly, gripping the rumpled-suited man by the arm and swinging him about. "Give it to me, or you won't get a dime out of this robbery." His voice was grating, harsh.

Surprise flared briefly in the man's eyes. It was quickly replaced by a look of stark fear. Out on the second floor landing the cop had begun hammering at the door, shouting, "Open up or I'll blast off the lock!"

Sherdell said quietly, "Hand that bag over or you're finished."

Rumple Suit blinked and relinquished the bag. Sherdell opened it, his deft fingers ruffling through the packets of bills. Half of them he thrust under the large section of carpet beneath the bureau. Then he opened the window as wide as he could.

In the hallway, the cop abandoned his intention of blasting off the lock and put his shoulder to the door.

"When he comes in, we'll be fighting," Sherdell said, putting the bag on the window ledge. "Quick now, or neither of us will ever get his share of the loot."

To conceal his real intention he cocked a fist and then, drawing a deep breath, he gripped the rumple-suited man by the throat. Relentlessly, despite the other's feeble struggles, he applied steady pressure with his thumbs until the man's face grew livid and his tongue protruded.

Before Sherdell let him sag to the floor he went through his pockets and took possession of his keys, knowing he'd have to return to the room as soon as possible to pick up the money he'd hidden under the carpet.

The door finally crashed open, and the cop staggered into the room, recovering his balance with an effort. For an instant he stood

staring down grimly at the slumped form on the floor.

Sherdell said coolly, "I was in the bank when he started dumping money into that bag. I followed him here. Maybe I killed him. I was trying to save the bank's money, but I might've lost some of it." He gestured at the bag, tilted to one side on the window ledge, then up to the opened window.

The cop walked over to Sherdell and suddenly hit him, flush on the jaw. "You damned lying murder er!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then hear me good," the cop snapped. "The man you killed was Benny Steele. He's a mute—can't talk."

"Mute?" Sherdell felt dizzy. "But he—he was robbing the bank. He ran away from me."

"He ran because you started to chase him," the cop said sharply. "He was running from you. Maybe you thought at first that he was a crook. But he was right in figuring that you were one."

The cop walked over to the leather bag and pulled out the note giving a list of denominations in which the mute man had wanted the money. Underneath was a bank book. No doubt a withdrawal slip in Benny Steele's name was back at the bank.

Stephen Sherdell gasped.

"He was an honest customer who was taking out a lot of his own money, that's all," the cop said. "Now, where's the dough you stole from him?"

Next Month—An Extraordinary Novelet

CIGARETTE

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

The cigarette was like a time-bomb, clock-triggered and deadly. Woolrich at his most exciting.

A Short Novel of Suspense by a Very Famous Writer

AN ENEMY AT THE DINNER TABLE

Hugh North had a great admiration for Southern Hospitality. But murder with violence he didn't like, even in Dixieland.

by VAN WYCK MASON

THE OLD CAR was rattling along so comfortably beneath widespread banners of Spanish moss that Captain Hugh North relaxed. Presently he was moved to reflect yet again upon the two totally dissimilar letters which had arrived in the morning mail two days previously and prompted this visit to South Carolina. There was no need for him to pull out and re-read Virginia Seabrook's unexpected invitation. He knew its contents by heart.

She had written: "Dear Captain North: It was nice to meet you at Iris Brandon's house party. I was so fascinated by the stories you told me about the places you've been to that I could make this a very long letter. But instead . . . I'm going to get practical. Didn't you say you're taking your vacation round this time? I am hoping you'll spend part of it with us. It would be a real treat to show you Magnolia Hill. I do hope you'll be sweet and accept. Please come. . . . Cordially, *Virginia Seabrook*."

And there was that other note, less pleasant, but equally intriguing. Someone had, with considerable neatness and patience, snipped from a magazine words and letters which, pasted on ordinary yellow duplicate paper read: "Hugh North: Mind your own business and keep away from the Seabrook plantation if you value your life. This is no joke."

There had been no signature. In fact, the only things the two missives had in common were identical postmarks. Both had been mailed in Charleston on the same day and the same hour.

So here was Captain Hugh

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North of G-2, U. S. Army, jolting along a drowsy South Carolina road with a hastily packed bag at his feet and a strictly utilitarian .32 nestling beneath his left arm. While yielding to the ancient vehicle's lurches he considered the vaguely disquieting fact that when the train had rumbled into Queen's Oak, that somnolent little flag station mentioned in Virginia Seabrook's telegram, there had been no one from Magnolia Hill to meet him.

A half hour wait had produced no conveyance, so he'd ended by hiring the gaunt native who now sat hunched above the wheel to undertake the four mile trip to Magnolia Hill.

"Yessuh," the gaunt man was saying, "Old Mr. Seabrook owns near half of this country now. Just like the Prenderburys used to."

"Prenderburys, eh? Who owned it before them?"

The man's tobacco-dimmed teeth glinted. "Injuns, I reckon."

The car slowed to negotiate a hairpin bend and then, with the hardy abandon of a whippet tank, plunged into a gulley dug by some torrential summer rain. The jolt threw North sidewise so violently that his hat was knocked from his head.

Simultaneously, the staccato report of a rifle drew reverberations from the live oaks which towered on both sides of the road and a bullet sang over North's shoulder to flick a neat, bright-rimmed hole in the car's side.

North snatched out the .32 and ducked low in his seat as another report cracked out. This time the windshield shattered amid a sunlit cloud of red dust, as the car went careening over into a ditch. The instant its wheels stopped turning, North utilized the billowing dust to slither into the underbrush just beyond.

To his surprise, the gaunt driver had not been killed, and did not even appear terror stricken.

"Hey, Mister, don't get scared!," he called out. "Reckon that was just one of the Pearce boys shootin' turkeys out of season. It's safe to come back now. We've got to be gettin' on."

He was bending over to inspect the hole in his windshield when North returned to the car.

"Damned if that ain't a bullet hole!" he muttered. "That turkey-shooting young scalawag is goin' to pay for my windshield!"

"He's gone," North snapped. "Hear him?"

Faint, but quite perceptible was the crackle as of someone hurrying through the underbrush on the far side of the road.

"Is there another road near here?" North asked.

The driver nodded. "The other side of yonder ridge leads to Charleston. It forks a piece ahead." The gaunt man's red-rimmed eyes narrowed and he

seemed to arrive at a conclusion. "Say, Mister, I ain't got nobody down on me, so I reckon it must have been you they was shootin' at."

Casting a wary look at the pine woods, he suddenly shoved North's bag onto the roadside. "I'll just trouble you for two bucks. I've changed my mind about going on."

Since no persuasion short of violence could alter the man's decision, Hugh North found himself standing beside the road and regretfully watching a tail of dust recede in the direction of Queen's Oak. During a long moment he deliberated. Then he left his bag where it was, eased his cut-down .32 back into its holster, and went over to the pine clump.

Stooping, he retrieved a spent cartridge case from a tangle of myrtle and to his astonishment noted it fitted a .22 high-powered rifle. Such a weapon, he knew, was capable of developing terrific velocity with a minimum of recoil, a fact which he labeled with a bright red tag and filed for later consideration. More thoughtfully, he resumed his survey of the area, but unfortunately the summer had been both hot and dry and the ground recorded little save a single small and indistinct footprint.

Quail were raising their melodious calls on all sides and the sun had swept out of sight behind a series of towering live oaks when, some five minutes later, a small sports car came roaring into sight around a turn in the road.

Hugh North stepped abruptly into view, and signaled for the driver to stop. When the brakes had squealed to a halt, North found himself regarding a long-limbed young woman with copper-hued hair, very cool and trim in a smart little hat and an effectively-tight boucle dress. Promptly he noticed that she wasn't merely *looking* at him. She was observing him closely, from dusty shoes to equally dusty panama.

Her eyes, large and a trifle heavy-lidded, widened as she demanded coldly, "Why did you stop me? What can I do for you?"

Hugh North, standing very tall and brown-faced beside the roadster, flashed a smile. "There seems to be a lamentable dearth of transportation around here. I was wondering whether you'd consider giving a lonely wayfarer a lift? My name is North."

"North?" The girl continued to regard him closely. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm afraid not," North said. "I'm just down here on a visit."

"Down here!" That means you're a Yankee." The girl in the car seemed dubious. "What's happened to you? You weren't walking in the road when I rounded that bend back there."

"I was in the underbrush, doing

a little investigating," North said. "Some pothunter got careless and a couple of his bullets struck the car I'd hired. My driver was fool enough to take it seriously and turned back."

"Shots—what kind of shots?" The redhaired girl's manner was careless, but there was more than casual interest beneath the surface of her words.

"I'm not sure. But they sounded like rifle shots."

The girl's anger had vanished now. She wrinkled her nose. "You'll be forming a dreadful opinion of our hospitality, Mr. North, so I reckon I had better take pity on you. Where are you going?"

"I was on my way to Magnolia Hill. They should have received my telegraph long before now. You know where it is?"

"Oh!" A mask seemed to drop over her delicate features. "So you're it!"

"It?"

"Yes, Ginny's big surprise!" Soft laughter echoed among the ragged gonfalons of Spanish moss. "She's kept us all guessing."

Deliberately her look engaged and held his, asking silent questions. "Jump in, and we'll go back for your baggage. By the way, I'm Stephenie Bartram—Ginny's stepsister."

Deftly, the slim young woman shifted conversational gears when once North had settled into the seat beside her. "I thought you were a hold-up man, for a fact."

"Do you have many? I thought this road was the most peaceful thing I'd seen in years.

A momentary tenseness came into the girl's face. "Generally it's right quiet. But there's been some lawlessness of late."

It was when he got out to reclaim his suitcase, that Hugh North for the first time noticed the existence of several badly pulled threads in the girl's knitted skirt. Then another item caught his eye. Above one ankle a raw red scratch was bleeding through the girl's stocking, even though the fabric was intact.

"Reckon old Dixon must have lost your telegram or we'd have met you at the station," Stephanie Bartram said. "He's so forgetful, I don't see why Scott doesn't get rid of him."

For some little time, the car sped smoothly along through a countryside of increasing charm. Now its tires rattled on a plank bridge above a drowsy emerald-

hued streamlet to the annoyance of many snowy egrets wading in hopes of an incautious frog or minnow, and now the rather sombre pine woods opened with the unexpectedness of a box's raised lid to disclose vistas of long-abandoned rice fields.

"You used the word 'all' a while back," North said. "Do I gather I've been invited to a house party?"

"Only close friends of the family," the girl replied. "You see, Scott—Daddy—is planning to marry again next month. He's giving a dinner tonight for Mrs. Lawton."

"Mrs. Lawton?" North sensed a slight tinge of resentment in his companion's voice, so lingered on the name with elaborate casualness.

"Yes, Lucretia's a widow," Stephanie said. "She comes from Charleston. Scott fell in love with her last fall." Her slim shoulders rose in a little shrug. "That's that, I reckon. Besides you, there'll be Scott's two partners, Mr. Jameson,"—she paused absently to rub the scratched ankle—"and Cliff."

"Cliff?"

"Clifford Rowan," the girl amplified and, rounding a gigantic live oak, skilfully avoided a negro driving a lop-eared mule. "He's a cousin of Ginny's. Then there'll be my Uncle Billy Mosby, he's visiting with us, and your humble chauffeur."

"You said you're Miss Seabrook's half sister?" North queried.

"No, step-sister. I think Ginny's a darling. Don't you?" Nothing but genuine enthusiasm seemed to tinge the Bartram girl's declaration.

"She's very attractive," North said.

"Attractive!" laughed Stephanie. Then, as if struck by a sudden realization, flung him a puzzled glance. "I declare, there's a conservative man for you! A Charleston boy would still be raving about Ginny's honey-colored hair, and eyes like dawn stars."

"And perhaps not meaning it half so much!"

"Maybe not. But compliments always please a pretty woman, Mr. North. Ahead is Magnolia Hill."

Stephanie turned the car into a long, magnolia-bordered drive up towards a stately white pillared plantation house. So gracefully did the slim columns rise amid their setting of live oaks that Hugh North was soothed by an impression of enduring and unshakable serenity. Yet only chance had prevented a rifle bullet from ending his career in the back of an ancient car.

II

THE SPORTS CAR'S tires had barely ceased to crackle on the graveled driveway when a clatter

of hoofs drew North's attention to a horseman cantering easily up from the right. The rider, he decided, was in his early thirties and sat on his chestnut thoroughbred with the accomplished ease of a man schooled in riding from early youth.

"Hello, Stevie," the rider hailed. "Beat me to the wire by a neck—"

Stephanie Bartram's face was calm but her voice was harsh with disbelief. "Were you out riding alone?"

"No, Ginny went along," he said easily. "Funny, she was possessed to ride over to Rosetree. I stopped off to see Tim Boykin's pointer puppies," he said with a smile.

The horseman dismounted, strode swiftly to the car and held out his hand. "Since Stephanie seems determined not to do the honors, I'm Cliff Rowan."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Rowan," North said. "I sent your cousin a telegram, but apparently it wasn't delivered. I'm sorry to have caused you so much inconvenience."

"A telegram?" Rowan seemed more than a little surprised. "Oh, so that's why Ginny was so set on riding over to Rosetree."

"I can't imagine what happened to that wire," North said, frankly admiring the thoroughbred sniffing dubiously at the car. "I sent it yesterday."

"Oh, it was not the least bother," Rowan said with a smile. "The road to Rosetree's right pretty. Follows the top of a ridge. At the highest point you can see for miles."

"Ridge?" North started to say, noting mud high on the thoroughbred's pasterns. Instead he asked, "I'd like to greet my hostess. Do you know whether she's back yet?"

Apparently Clifford Rowan had no idea. But Stephanie, slipping a cigarette between her lips, nodded at the mansion's wide front steps. Almost running down them was a slender young woman very trim in a turtle-neck sweater and jodhpurs. Eyes sparkling, she ran up to North with both of her hands extended.

"Why, Hugh! How in the world did you get here? Why didn't you let me know what train you'd be arriving on? We'd have met you at the station."

"So sorry, Virginia," North said. "I expect the doorman at my club has a conscience that's more of an accomplice than a guide. Apparently he pocketed the money and tore up my wire."

"I'm so dreadfully sorry you weren't met," Virginia Seabrook said.

North smiled reassuringly. "Everything turned out all right. Miss Bartram happened along and gave me a lift."

"Good thing Stevie went in to Charleston," Rowan drawled. "Well, I reckon I'd better put Tar-

heels away and send Dixon to fetch in Mr. North's luggage."

Was it quite natural, North asked himself, for dark-eyed Stephanie Bartram to make no mention of the shooting?

At that moment, there appeared among the pillars above a rather plump woman whose mouth suggested a lavender-tinted ruler mark. She retained faded traces of beauty, like a print long exposed to sunlight. Silently she surveyed the newcomer, then without a word turned and disappeared.

"That's Mrs. Prenderbury," Virginia explained, slipping her arm through North's. "She's a distant relation of Stevie's. And is dad's housekeeper. I expect she's annoyed because she wasn't told when you'd get here."

Before Hugh North had a chance to comment, a big white-haired man appeared. Instinctively he liked the man who stood in the doorway with a welcoming smile on his face. His white hair, florid cheeks and blue eyes were so crisp and clean looking.

"Hugh, this is daddy," Virginia said.

"Well, well, so this is the famous Captain North!" Mr. Scott Seabrook chuckled. "I followed the Freeman case from beginning to end and by God, I still can't figure out how you caught the Guardsman. You remember, Ginny. He was the fellow North caught bribing government officials?"

Virginia darted to her father's side. "Please, daddy, don't tell anyone about Captain North's being a detective. He thinks it makes people uncomfortable. You know how it is, dad. No one likes the sensation of being watched by a—a trained observer?"

Scott Seabrook seemed puzzled to the point of being ill at ease. "Why, of course, Virginia," he promised. "I'll respect your guest's wishes." He bowed as his daughter led her guest toward a wide staircase. She looked very slight and slender beside North's wiry five feet ten as she accompanied him up the steps.

Virginia paused on the first floor landing and wide eyes softly blue in the glow of the hall lights swept up to meet his in earnest appeal. "Please forgive me for dragging you down here. But I couldn't think of anyone else I could turn to. This isn't quite an ordinary house party, just family and old friends. But there's something going on that frightens me . . . Something wrong—" Impulsively her hand tightened on his arm.

"I was glad to come," North said, feeling suddenly ill at ease. "I really did want to see you again."

When they reached the head of the stairs, Virginia beckoned him into a small study and tucked her lower lip between her teeth. "I just can't imagine what could have

happened to your wire. They're usually phoned over from Rosetree. But I ordered yours to be written out and delivered, because I didn't want anybody to know who you really are. Oh, you've no idea how relieved I was when I saw you."

"Whatever's wrong must be pretty serious," North said quietly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Somebody shot at me, twice, on the road from Queen's Oak."

"Shot at you!" Trembling, Virginia Seabrook's hand crept out to rest on his. "How awful! Did you see who it was?"

"No, unfortunately. Then there was this letter." He gave Virginia the brief, ugly note, watching her face closely while she scanned it.

"How perfectly awful."

"It came in the same mail as your invitation," North said. "You've no idea who could have sent it."

"That's just the trouble, Hugh. A half-dozen people might have sent it."

"Who else knew that you'd invited me?"

"Only Daddy and Cud'n Emily —she's Mrs. Prendenbury. But even they didn't know your name."

"And you merely told the other guests you'd a surprise for them?"

"Yes."

From his pocket, North pulled out that deadly little cartridge case he'd found above the road. "Do you know if anybody around Magnolia Hill owns a rifle that fires that kind of shell?"

"Where did you get it?" Virginia asked.

"Answer my question first, please."

"Why it looks like daddy's twenty-two high power."

"Your father's!" North's expression was grim. "Does anybody else in the region own a twenty-two calibre repeating rifle?"

"Why no. Not that I know of."

"Where was your father this afternoon?"

"In Charleston, as usual. Old Dixon drove him."

"Hi, you-all," Stephanie's lazily rich voice hailed from down the hall. "You'll be late for dinner if you don't stop talking, and Mrs. Prenderbury will look daggers." Stephanie Bartram hovered at the library door.

"You're a fine hostess, Ginny," she said. "Look at the poor man caked with dust and dinner not half an hour off." Her teeth sparkled in a swift smile. "While you've been talking his head off, honey, I've been fixing up his room. Don't I deserve special consideration for that, Mr. North?"

"You do," North agreed, "and I'm rather famous for my consideration. Well, perhaps we'd better let the cold light of Miss Bartram's reason shine upon us, Virginia. We can get caught up on our gossip after dinner." He gave her a warm smile, but Virginia's bright little

mouth remained taut when she nodded.

"Of course. Steve's right. See you in about half an hour."

III

DINNER PROVED such a triumph of Southern cuisine that a measure of the tautness departed from North as his deep-set eyes wandered down the long crystal and silver burdened table, briefly inspecting the guests.

He was about to speak when a breath of air, beating suddenly in, blew out one of the candles gleaming in an antique candelabrum.

"Oh," cried Stephanie, "that's bad luck! Light it again quickly, someone."

"Bad luck?" asked North.

"Yes." It was Mrs. Prenderbury who answered him, her faintly yellowish features devoid of expression. "Superstitious folk would say it means that one of the people at this table is going to—"

"Oh, don't say it!" Virginia cried quickly. "It's utter nonsense to believe—"

Her remark ended in a little gasp for, as the butler struggled to close the window against a wind which had commenced to sigh uneasily about the house, a sudden puff of air extinguished a candle located directly before Stephanie Bartram. She turned so pale that a light application of rouge was visible on her cheeks.

Giles Jameson, an alert man with penetrating eyes of the palest blue, laughed a trifle too heartily. "Why so upset, Miss Stephanie? You always jeer at superstition."

"I—I'm not upset!" she snapped.

"Good. I don't believe in such nonsense, either," Jameson paused as Seabrook hastily relit the candles. "Well, here's hoping the bad luck has been averted, eh Rowan?" He was casual but his voice had a serious undertone that did not escape Hugh North.

"Funny," Jameson the bald broker, went on, "all day I've had a feeling that something lay on the lap of the gods. Ever had a feeling like that, Mrs. Lawton?"

Mrs. Lawton started and smiled a little nervously. "Why—why no."

"Not even in Ecuador?"

"Not even in Ecuador," evenly returned Scott Seabrook's fiancee. "I'm afraid I'm not of the imaginative sort, Mr. Jameson."

North felt inclined to agree; if ever cold common sense was written on a woman's face it was on Lucretia Lawton's. She seemed one of those rare females who knew what she wanted and proposed to have it.

"Speaking of bad luck, Scotty," Jameson went on, drumming gently on the table, "my secretary came down with virus again. You'll have to lend me a hand tomorrow."

Seabrook's brows met and he shot his partner a suspicious look as Rowan grunted, "She would. I notice her virus shows up just about two days ahead of the auditors. You'd better get rid of her. I've enough of a job keeping my accounts straight—"

"Really?" sniffed Stephanie, toying with her soup. "I'd always heard you were very clever with figures."

A slow tide of crimson welled into Rowan's brown countenance. "Thanks, Steve, for the bouquet."

"Oh, come now." Seabrook was looking definitely unhappy. "Shop's ruled out—eh, Giles?"

Jameson's hairless head inclined slowly. "For the time being, but we'll have to talk later. I'm ready to go into that matter we spoke of yesterday."

"Good, so am I." The grim lines which had hardened Seabrook's mouth vanished when he stood up and tapped on his wine glass.

"My family and friends, it is for us all a special pleasure to have with us on this happy occasion Virginia's old friend, Mr. North. As all good South Carolinians know," he bowed a little in Mrs. Prenderbury's direction, "Magnolia Hill has long been famed for the charm and beauty of its chatelaines. My first wife, Virginia's mother, unfortunately never lived here, but Stephanie's mother knew and loved this old plantation which is now to have another chatelaine worthy of its best traditions."

Many miniature candle flames glistened on Scott Seabrook's upraised champagne glass. "To the future Mrs. Seabrook!"

As the guests arose North was intrigued to see how straight Mrs. Lawton sat and how her beautiful eyes sparkled and danced. She suggested to him a figure in chromium—brilliant, beautiful, and as hard.

"On your feet, Giles," Seabrook called. "You haven't had enough yet to be sleeping."

Turning quickly, North realized that Jameson was staring, empty-eyed at his plate and when Stephanie playfully nudged him on the shoulder, the broker toppled heavily forward to lie nuzzling his soup plate.

For an instant the silence of overwhelming astonishment held the diners in its grip, all save Hugh North who immediately darted from his seat and bent above the fallen man. The man's face had turned a hideous blue. He tilted Jameson's sagging form back onto the chair and wiped soup from his cheek, suddenly aware of an odd quivering in the stricken man's fingers.

"I'm going to phone for Dr. Kane," Virginia said, as she cast a frightened look over the gleaming ivory of her shoulder. "It must be his heart. He's had attacks like this before." She hurried out.

"Help me carry him into the living room," North said over Jameson's heavy breathing. "There's a sofa there I think."

On sliding a cushion beneath Jameson's hairless head, Hugh North was surprised when he saw that Jameson' eyes were wide and lucid.

"Can you speak?" North asked, but from Jameson's throat came only an incoherent gurgling.

"Maybe he can write," Uncle Billy suggested in a low voice. "It would help if he could tell what's wrong."

"He can't. All the motor centers are effected," remarked Stephanie as if to herself.

"You've been in training?" North tossed the copper-haired girl a searching glance.

"Only a year at Charleston General. I—I didn't finish."

"Will everybody please go outside?" North's request was deferential but held the quality of a command. "Mr. Jameson's only chance is to rest. There is nothing to be done till the doctor arrives."

As the others filed out North registered a series of impressions. Seabrook, haggard and desperately worried; Mrs. Lawton, tight-lipped; Uncle Billy Mosby, vague and blinking short-sightedly; Stephaine frozen faced and beautiful; Mrs. Prenderbury, very straight of back and wearing a nervous half smile which signified nothing in the way of amusement; Clifford

Rowan, frowning and lost in thoughts which could not have been entirely agreeable; and last of all Virginia, her features haunted with poignant anxiety.

He beckoned her back. "Please watch carefully what goes on. I have to stay here."

As soon as he was alone North bent and spoke to the stricken man in an urgent tone. "Mr. Jameson, please close your eyes if you understand me."

When both eyelids dropped, North said, "Close your right eye for 'Yes,' your left for 'No,' and both eyes if you can't answer my question." Bending lower still, North queried, "Are you growing weaker?"

Jameson closed his right eye,

but to "Do you think you've had a stroke?" he gave a negative signal.

"Do you know who tried to kill you?"

When the left eyelid fluttered down, North shot a fresh question: "Had you an enemy at the dinner table?"

Jameson's right eye flickered shut twice. Two enemies!

"Is anyone else in danger?" North asked quickly.

It was dreadful to watch Jameson's efforts as once more his right eyelid sagged twice. Apparently of all his body's complex mechanisms only his eyes remained faithful to a still living brain.

"Then two people are in danger?"

An affirmative wink.

"Who do you think wanted to kill you? I'll go over the names slowly—"

But before he could begin, there was a loud and insistent knocking at the door. "Hugh! Here's Dr. Kane!" Virginia Seabrook called. "Let us in."

What happened then was ghastly. The stricken man gave a convulsive shudder and his head fell forward on his chest, his jaw hanging open.

It took North only an instant to determine Giles Jameson was dead. He arose slowly, crossed to the door and unlocked it with steady fingers.

In the doorway stood Virginia and a neat, round-shouldered man who carried a doctor's bag in one hand. Behind them loomed a double row of pallid and uneasy faces.

"I came as quickly as I could," Dr. Kane explained. "We had guests to dinner."

"Even if you'd been in the house, Doctor, I doubt if anything could have been done," North said. "Mr. Jameson died a moment after you began knocking."

The others came swiftly into the room. It was on red-haired Stephanie Bartram that Hugh North's eyes lingered longest as she stood beside a grand piano, a sculptured Sybil brooding with compressed lips and nervously kneading her handkerchief of green silk.

Presently Scott Seabrook roused himself. "I believe we'd better let Dr. Kane take charge from now on. Come along, Mr. North, a drop of rye will do none of us any harm."

Hugh North made a pretense of following his host, but at the same time managed to give Dr. Kane a significant look. Immediately that individual earned his undying gratitude by calling out, "Just a minute, Mr. North. I'll need you to answer a few questions."

As soon as they were alone North asked, "Do you think Mr. Jameson died of a heart attack?"

"No," the other snapped. "Ever since I laid eyes on the body I've been puzzled and trying to recall similar symptoms. What happened to him?"

"That," North replied with a bleak smile, "is what you and I have got to find out in a hurry."

Dr. Kane started and stared. "In a hurry? Precisely what do you mean?"

Hugh North said very quietly, "Somewhere in this house there's at least one killer—as clever and conscienceless a murderer as I've ever met up with. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Doctor, the murderer will kill again.

IV

DR. MANLY KANE drew a slow, deep breath and, as rain began to peck at the windows of Magnolia Hill, a fine perspiration spangled his forehead. Curiously his bright brown eyes probed North's bronzed countenance.

"Just who are you?" he asked. "I've got to know before we go any further. Hold on!" The country doctor's features, etched by South Carolina's hot sun into myriad tiny wrinkles, contracted. "You aren't—you can't be—the famous Hugh North!"

Almost shyly he offered his hand. "By George, Captain," he said, "ever since I read about the Freeman case I've been hoping to meet you. I'd no idea so brilliant a detective was in Carolina."

"I fear you've a weakness for exaggeration," North said, smilingly. "The papers can make a tolerably big mountain out of a very small mole hill. In the meantime, we better find out if there's a wound of any sort?"

The gray-haired doctor sobered immediately when his companion began to unbutton the murdered broker's coat and, working in silence, aided him in stripping the plum colored corpse to its waist. Expertly the two studied every inch of skin, utilizing the light of the old chandelier.

"This is a new one on me," Dr. Kane admitted while undoing the dead man's belt.

"It's tough all right," North agreed and deftly slid the trousers down to the ankles, "when without any warning a man keels over at a dinner table and doesn't lose consciousness. Of course, he may—"

Hugh North's flow of conversation stopped as he bent low to peer intently at the dead man's badly swollen left leg. On the outside of it and perhaps an inch above the ankle, was an angry, red-black swelling.

"It's a bite!" Dr. Kane said sharply. "Look, there's the puncture!" And with his forefinger he indicated a ruby drop no larger than a pin head.

"There's no doubt the skin has been broken," North said in a low voice, "which should simplify matters somewhat."

"Well, I'm damned," grunted the doctor with blunt fingers testing the tight and shiny skin about the little wound. "If this hadn't

happened in Scott Seabrook's dining room I'd have sworn Jameson suffered a snake bite—say a moccasin with one fang. See? The incision's quite deep."

"And not a bit ragged," North added thoughtfully. "Whatever inflicted that wound was sharp. It certainly does look like a bite or sting of some sort. But, Doctor, have you ever heard of moccasin or even rattlesnake venom instantly paralyzing a victim? A human being, that is?"

In growing agitation Dr. Kane wiped his eye glasses. "No, Captain, I haven't, though death can follow swiftly if venom is introduced into one of the victim's arteries. Frankly, I've never heard of a venom acting like this. Have you?

North straightened. "Not quite like this—but the vegetable poisons of certain primitive races have a paralytic effect. Curare, antiaris toxicana are among them. The paralytic action of antiaris, for instance, is practically instantaneous if it is introduced directly into the blood stream."

"Even supposing we have met a combination of two blood poisons," Dr. Kane said slowly, "how could it have been administered when Jameson was at the table in a roomful of people? I understand that Giles Jameson himself made no complaint and no one noted anything wrong with him before he toppled over."

"The only thing I can say is that I've an idea of how the thing might be done," North said slowly. "But it's pretty fanciful, so if you'll try to determine the depth and direction of the wound, I'm going to take a look at the dining room."

He found Clifford Rowan standing in the big, oak panelled room beside a hunting board agleam with a heavy load of old Sheffield. Though the youngest partner was very innocently smoking his pipe, North noted faint smudges on the knees of his white linen trousers.

"Going to be quite a storm. It's a good night to stay where one belongs," said Rowan, nodding towards a French window beyond which a flash of lightning had briefly revealed wet, funereal magnolias whipping under gusts of wind. There was, North decided, a current of warning beneath the surface of Rowan's words.

"Yes. It's quite a tempest, as they say down East," North observed equably. "A storm like this is nothing to take chances with. I hope no one gets hurt. I wonder if you'd tell Virginia I want to talk with her a minute?"

"Be glad to." Rowan, evidently relieved to quit the scene, nodded and strode from the room, silently for a man of his build.

Left alone, North paused at the food of that table at which Giles Jameson had been stricken and mentally replaced the guests in

their various chairs. After a moment he seated himself in that chair which had been occupied by the youngest member of the firm of Seabrook, Jameson and Rowan. Even a short-legged man, he decided, could easily have reached a person sitting opposite.

"Suppose," North told himself, "that some bright person fixed a pointed implement between his shoe's upper and sole leather?"

While the rain tapped with a thousand insistent fingers on darkly streaming panes, he reconsidered the position of that tiny puncture which had let out Jameson's life. It had been on the left side of the left leg, and towards the back. A glancing blow from in front, however, might account for it. He blinked. At the murdered man's left had set red-haired, lazy voiced Stephanie Bartram. To the right? Mrs. Prenderbury.

If he clung to his present concept of the attack, Seabrook's housekeeper could not possibly have scratched Jameson on the ankle away from her. Had anyone at the table made an untoward movement? He doubted it. In his wary frame of mind, he would almost certainly have noticed such a movement.

His brow creased in speculation, North arose and went around to Jameson's chair, a graceful Sheraton piece glowing with the mellow patina of age and years of faithful polishing. He wasted small time in artistic appreciation, however. Risking a smudge on his knees, he knelt to examine the chair in question.

When nothing of interest attracted his attention he dragged it over to the light and turned it onto its side. Turning it this way and that he exposed legs, seat and back to various planes of light. As he had expected, many fingerprints were registered on the old mahogany's lustrous surface—too many.

With the harsh glare of lightning continually beating in through Venetian blinds, the lean figure in shirt sleeves suddenly seated himself and began to sight up the chair's various legs.

His breath came in with a click for, distinctly visible on the polished wood of the left foreleg, was a dull quadrangular area about the thickness of his little finger. Further, he noted that this area was roughly bisected by a narrow lane of untarnished finish!

Snatching out a pen knife, North carefully removed from a worm hole a tiny lump off grayish matter which he dropped onto a match box. The dull spot he estimated as being about three-eighths of an inch in width but he registered its dimensions by making little nicks on a match stick.

Definitely discarding his previous theory, he then dropped onto all fours and commenced a survey beneath the table, well aware the passage of every moment would

afford the killer more leisure to escape or to prepare for a fresh attempt.

All at once he gave a little grunt of satisfaction and with the point of his knife dislodged from the rug's deep nap what appeared to be a long sharp pin. When he straightened and realized what he had found, his heart began thumping like a bushman's tom-tom. This was no pin, but the broken-off shank and point of a hypodermic needle!

It was, he saw, perfectly ordinary except for the fact that near the point some little streaks of an oily substance glowed ruby red in the electric light; more of the stuff was clogging the needle's canal. A very close peal of thunder shook Magnolia Hill and its lights wavered as he raided the sideboard for a second match box.

"Cliff said you wanted to see me?" Virginia had come into the room so silently that he was not aware of her presence until she spoke.

North motioned her to a chair, and asked: "Well, Virginia, what happened since you left me in the drawing room?"

"Everybody went into the library and sat around looking thoughtful. Badly shaken too, of course. All except Stevie. She went off to the dining room and just came back to the library."

"Anybody else leave?"

The girl hesitated. "Yes, Mrs. Lawton went up to her room and only came down a few minutes ago. She said she wanted to put her jewels—" a note of bitterness crept into Virginia's voice—"in a safe place."

"And was Rowan with you all the while?"

"No. He went out looking for Stevie. I heard them talking in here. Then she came back. I think she'd been crying."

"Does she cry often?"

"Oh, no! She's most like a man about that."

Hugh North nodded silently, and to help his hostess regain her composure, he lit a short-stemmed pipe before approaching his main line of inquiry.

"What does Mr. Rowan do with his leisure time?"

A little flush threw color into the smooth pallor of Virginia Seabrook's cheeks. "Hunts, rides and pays court to Stevie. That is, he used to."

Someone must have opened the library door for quite clearly Uncle Billy's voice reached him—"Yes, indeed, a cup of coffee can be very bracing at moments like these. How about you, Mrs. Lawton?"

"I would like some, Mr. Mosby," Seabrook's fiancee could be heard saying. "I never take sugar, and now please tell me more about Chichen-Itza."

Then the voices faded into the boisterous booming of the wind

and North resumed, "Was it a serious disagreement?"

"Worse than usual," Virginia said. "I'm afraid Stevie tried to boss Cliff about just once too often. He's been mighty interested in me recently."

"And you haven't discouraged him?"

Virginia nodded emphatically. "I should say not. Cliff's a mighty nice boy and he's going to be awful rich some day and if Stevie doesn't quit fooling about she's sure going to lose him. I keep telling her no man worth the powder to blow him up is willing to be stomped on."

A thoughtful smoke ring rose from North's lips and went whirling across the dining room.

"Mr. Rowan doesn't really care for you?"

"Me?" Virginia's eyes flew wide open. "I'm afraid it's Stevie he's wild about."

"Then," North chose his words carefully, "I wouldn't keep up the game much longer. Your step-sister doesn't impress me as the kind to turn the other cheek. But about Rowan. You said he's fond of horses and dogs?"

"Very much so. He's always out with some of the swamp people. It pretty near broke his heart when some of his pointer pups died of distemper last fall."

Increasingly satisfied with the trend of conversation, North suggested, "If he was so fond of them, it's funny he didn't bother to innoculate them."

"Oh, but he did," Virginia said. "Only he tried a new kind of serum which was no good. Daddy says Cliff could make a good living at vetting."

Hugh North took care to conceal his rising interest. So young Rowan injected his own dogs?

"Well, Virginia," he said, rising, "I've been talking to you long

enough so I'll be getting back to Dr. Kane."

"Oh, Hugh, please don't go. I was just beginning to relax." The haunted look reappeared in her eyes and convulsively she covered her ears as a particularly deafening crash of thunder shook the plantation house.

"I'm sure nothing more is going to happen," North said, not believing his statement. "But if you're that worried you'd better stick close to your father."

Momentarily Virginia's wide brows merged. "I—I can't. Daddy's more nervous than ever. Mrs. Lawton is making too much of a fuss over him in that sticky sweet way of hers. You should have seen the look Cud'n Emily gave her."

"Isn't it natural that Mrs. Lawton should be attentive?" North said. "She seems very much in love with your father. At least, that's the impression I got."

"She ought to be," blazed Virginia, then averted a quivering face. "The way Daddy's been plastering her with jewels while Stevie and I have had to skimp along on half our old allowance. It—it isn't fair."

She accepted North's silently proffered handkerchief, made hasty repairs and summoned a tremulous smile. "Please, Hugh, be a sweet boy and forget what I just said. It's Dad's money and he's a right to do what he pleases with it. I reckon I'm just being nasty."

"You're far from that," North said. "You're something rather special in the way of girls. Oh, one last thing, Virginia. Does anyone living here require a special diet?"

"Why, yes, Cud'n Emily and Mrs. Lawton don't eat anything with much sugar in it." An elusive dimple flushed. "I do believe that's about the only thing Cud'n Emily and Lucretia have in common."

They reached the dining room door in time to see Mrs. Prenderbury go drifting down the corridor, silent as a dried leaf sailing across a forest floor. Uncle Billy must have been expecting her return for he immediately appeared at the library door.

"My dear Emily," he said, "I told you you left your glasses upstairs. May I get you some sherry? You look so very tired."

"Yes," she said. "I fear I shall be faint. Where's Mr. Seabrook?"

"He was dreadfully upset. He's gone to his room. Perhaps I'd better go up and comfort him."

To Virginia's cold hand North gave a reassuring pat. "Now if you're a wise girl you'll go find Stephanie and straighten out that nonsense about Rowan, and please tell everyone I shall want to see them in the library before long."

He found Dr. Kane in the act of disinfecting a slender probe.

"Well, Doctor?"

"The wound is not more than

half an inch deep and appears to have been made from the left rear."

"Good! That about settles it," North said. "Take a look at this."

Dr. Kane carefully began to stir the clue with the blunt end of a match. "As nearly as I can tell it's part of an ordinary hypodermic, no different from a hundred thousand others.

"That's what I was afraid of," North admitted with a grimace of disappointment, and produced the little lump of grayish matter. "Would you say this is gum from a piece of adhesive tape?"

"Yes." The doctor glanced up over his glasses. "Then Giles Jameson was murdered?"

North nodded. "Someone smeared this needle and its canal with deadly poison and fastened it with adhesive to the leg of Jameson's chair. Of course even a scratch would have eventually been fatal but poor Jameson managed to jab himself with real efficiency and got the poison into his post tibular artery. The murderer removed it later, but there's a mark made by the adhesive on the chair leg—roughly three-eights of an inch wide."

The country doctor's kindly face contracted as from a blow. "What a cowardly device! I wonder who hated Jameson so much?"

"Or feared him so much," said North. "If we could find the rest of the hypodermic it would help a lot but—well, I don't think our killer is that careless. Where are the nearest police to be found?"

As if he were donning a garment, Dr. Kane regained his self-possession. "I don't know whether we can locate a state trooper at this time. But I'll put in a call if you wish."

"I'd appreciate it," North murmured.

As the doctor's heels clicked hastily down the hall, North considered, who in this dim old house was familiar with hypodermics and their uses? Stephanie, who had studied nursing; Mrs. Lawton, who 'didn't use sugar,' and the handsome Cliff Rowan, who doctored his own dogs. Mrs. Prenderbury? Well, perhaps. He was startled by the return of Dr. Kane. The physician was frowning heavily.

"Well, Doctor, you got your call in quickly."

"I didn't," the doctor said. "Somebody has cut away and hidden the handset! And there's only the one telephone in this confounded big house!"

V

THE REALIZATION that Magnolia Hill had been practically isolated prompted Hugh North to accelerate his plans.

"We've two jobs, Doctor," he said. "One of which is to learn who killed Jameson; and to forestall another murder."

"Another murder?" gasped the round-shouldered doctor.

"Or murders, Doctor."

Dr. Kane's calm was reassuring. "What do you wish me to do?" he asked.

"Please send the butler to me and then ask the household to come here in about five minutes and, Doctor, please keep your eyes skinned. We can't afford to overlook any bets."

Five minutes later, Laurence Otis, the Seabrook butler was facing North. Every fiber of Otis's figure indicated conservative disapproval of current events.

"In regard to the telegram which arrived this morning," North began. "Who received it?"

"Telegram, sir? I don't recall one. Telegrams are customarily telephoned to Magnolia Hill."

"This one wasn't. Think. Did you receive a message of any sort this morning?"

Otis mopped his brow. "Yes, sir. One of the colored help brought in a note addressed to Miss Virginia. Could that have been the telegram, sir?"

"It could have been, Otis."

"Thank you, sir. Then it arrived about eleven of this morning, sir."

North regarded the butler with deceptively indifferent eyes. "You gave it to Miss Virginia?"

"No, sir, Miss Virginia was out marketing in Queen's Oak, sir, so I left it on a tray in the hallway where she would be sure to notice. Later it was gone, so I fancied Miss Virginia had found it."

"When was that, Otis?"

"It must have been about twelve, sir. I remember because I'd just finished discussing dinner with Mrs. Prenderbury."

"Was anyone else in the house at that time?"

"All the household sir."

"Mr. Seabrook and Mr. Rowan, too?"

"Mr. Rowan was here all day, sir, and Mr. Seabrook only went in to Charleston after luncheon. He returned just before Miss Virginia returned from her ride in fact, sir."

"Then you've no idea who took that note from the hall?"

Otis emitted a cough eloquent of distress. "No, sir, it is not my place to notice such matters. Miss Stephanie attends to the mail as a rule, sir."

Suppressing a small sigh, North sat back. So the note had lain on the hall table until someone had stolen it and thus learned by what train a visitor would arrive.

An odd realization came home. Barring Mrs. Prenderbury and possibly Uncle Billy, every one of the residents of Magnolia Hill had been out of the house around the time his train was pulling into Queen's Oak.

With a reassuring word, Hugh North dismissed the Seabrook's butler and attempted to correlate his gleanings.

Five minutes later a silent, and nervously vivacious group of people filed into the library in response to Dr. Kane's summons and it was hard to realize that one of them was a singularly able killer. In self-conscious silence the group disposed themselves about that charming little library which Lucretia Lawton had doomed to make into a breakfast room.

North's gaze swept the crowded little library. "Someone in this room has murdered Giles Jameson," he said bluntly.

A stunned silence gripped the group and tension spread like oil over water, but inexorably Hugh North's voice went on, low-pitched but impressive. "It follows that everyone in this house is suspected. Everyone here.

"I'm sure all of you understand why you're not to leave Magnolia Hill without permission," North went on. "Meanwhile, if you wish to make a declaration of innocence, all you have to do is to write, 'I know nothing about this dreadful business. So help me God, I am innocent of Giles Jameson's death!' "

"Really, Captain," Stephanie was sitting very straight. "I don't see why we should have to do this."

"Nor do I!" Mrs. Lawton's accents dripped resentment. "I warn you all, this is merely a crude subterfuge to get samples of our handwriting! Nevertheless, here's mine!" Definitely she raised her chin and scratched the suggested statement. "There! Mr. North, see what you can make of that!"

"You'll find this specimen a little oldfashioned I fear," Uncle Billy said, placing an example of Spencerian script before North.

"I'm not going to say anything till I get a lawyer, much less write it," Cliff Rowan said and turned angrily on Virginia. "I'm sure we all feel flattered, Ginny, I'll say you were right clever to invite a detective down here."

Under the oblique glances of her companions Virginia went crimson, but drew herself up straight as a caryatid.

"I would insult the whole state of South Carolina, Cliff Rowan, if I thought it would help my father. Here you are, Hugh."

"Thank you, Virginia," North said and casually surveyed the sheet she laid before him.

"If there is nothing more, Captain," snapped Scott Seabrook when all but Rowan had complied, "I must go to write some letters. With the auditors due so soon, Jameson's unexpected death will mean hard work for Clifford and me." With an attempt at cheerfulness, he glanced about. "Despite Captain North's very natural suspicious, I feel confident an autopsy will show that poor Giles died a natural death."

When all save Dr. Kane had gone out, North slowly ran through

the various statements and said, "Please ask Miss Virginia Seabrook to come back here in about five minutes."

Once the old doctor had shuffled out, North absently fingered the household's samples of writing and spelling. Why had Rowan refused to submit a sample? Sheer cussedness—or something else? B-u-s-n-e-s-s was the way the writer of the threatening letter had spelt it. Among the specimens before him someone, too, had spelled it thus and so raised a new whirlwind of doubts.

A light rap sounded on the library door and in response to North's "Come in" not Virginia but her step-sister entered.

"This is an unexpected plesure," North greeted and placed a chair before her. "I've been looking forward to a talk with you."

"Captain North," Stephanie Bartram cried, "please tell me how Mr. Jameson was killed. It seems so—so incredible, with all of us sitting right beside him."

"Isn't it?" Captain North agreed blandly. "I'll tell you my theory and—"

"Will you?"

"Yes!" Captain North nodded. "If you'll tell me exactly where you'd been just before you picked me up on the road."

Instantly the brightness departed from Stephanie's eyes and they become dull, uninformative. "Why I drove over to a movie at Randall Court House. I'd go miles to see Rock Hudson any time."

"Incidentally, the theater at Randall Court House isn't an open air one, is it?" North asked.

"Why, I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't you?" he asked from under politely incredulous brows. "Well, when we met on the Queen's Oak road I noticed a fresh scratch on your ankle and thorns don't grow in a movie theater."

"Really, Captain North, I've no idea what you are talking about."

"No?" He fixed her with an eye

gone suddenly coldly blue. "Well, I've a theory you weren't at the movies at all and that you scratched your ankle in the woods not very far from the point where I was shot at. Explanations are always a bore, I know, but why did you think it imperative to drive all the way to Randall Court House or —was it Queen's Oak—just to buy a new pair of stockings?"

"I—I didn't!"

"Come, come. Even a bachelor can recognize the faint crease down the front of a brand new pair of stockings. But I'll overlook your scratched ankle, Miss Bartram, if you'll tell me why you took such a violent dislike to a man who's never had a chance to tell you how very stunning you can look when you're angry."

Stephanie bit lips that writhed just a little, but managed to cling to composure. "Really, Captain, are you implying that I shot at you?"

North clasped hands behind head and regarded the doorway with care. No telling just who might appear there next.

"Doesn't it look that way? You'd time, opportunity and—" He almost said 'motive' but substituted. "A rifle, a gun a woman would choose, because even a .22 magnum doesn't kick much. Besides I found a small footprint in the ambush."

"Most well-bred Southerners have small feet," Stephanie said, suddenly very pale. "The Seabrooks included."

"You beg my question very skillfully." North smiled. "But unless you tell me where you really were before you met me this afternoon, I, well—you must consider yourself under arrest. A Federal officer has jurisdiction in any state of the Union."

"Arrest!" she cried in a shocked voice. "Really, Captain North, you wouldn't be so ungallant."

"Really I would. In my profession, gallantry is a side issue."

"You—you can then go to hell! I'll do as I please!" And rigid as a store window mannequin, Scott Seabrook's step-daughter swept from the room. But Hugh North, observing her closely, remained at the library desk with doubts and theories running around his brain with the frenzied orderliness of ants about a disturbed hill.

Presently he sketched the following questions on a sheet of note paper:

1. Who wrote that threatening note?

2. What were Clifford Rowan and Stephanie Bartram doing in the dining room?

3. Who killed Jameson?

4. Was it the same person who shot at me on the road with a rifle?

When Virginia Seabrook appeared lovely and trim as a millionaire's yacht, he beckoned her to his side.

"I wish," he said, "that you'd

look again at the threatening letter I got in Washington and compare it with these specimens of handwriting."

Virginia's breath came in with a little click when from an inner pocket North produced the note composed of clipped out letters and smoothed it out on the desk.

"But—but the threatening letter wasn't written and these notes are. What can you possibly tell from a comparison?"

"Please compare them, just the same."

Hugh North: Mind your own busness and keep away from the Seabrook plantation if you value your life. This is no joke.

"You know who wrote this?" he asked.

"Why, why no, Hugh," Virginia replied. "What makes you think I might?"

"Just this." With the stem of his pipe he underlined the word *busness*. "Didn't they teach you at your school that 'business' is spelt with an 'i'? You see, dear hostess, yours is the only specimen which also omits the 'i'."

"I didn't write that threatening letter," Virginia snapped, and with an angry gesture she dismissed the idea.

"Oh yes, you did. You see I know it was posted at exactly the same hour as your letter of invitation and at that time no one else knew you had even thought of inviting me."

The smooth oval of Virginia's face crumpled. "Oh, please, Hugh, please forgive me. I—I was so awfully scared you wouldn't accept my invitation." She made small pathetic movements with agitated hands. "I reckoned that maybe if I tried to scare you, you would surely come."

The girl looked so very contrite and unhappy North stifled a natural irritation.

"You'll—you'll forgive me?"

He leaned forward, cheekbones etched into prominence by the desk light. "Just what frightened you enough to risk prosecution for writing a threatening letter?"

Virginia dropped into a chair chair and sat there as if dumped. "One day last week Daddy was suddenly called to the phone just before I went to check his shirts and socks for the laundry. In the top drawer I found a letter—or the last part of one. I memorized it.

"It said: *'I know the phone is better, but I've been unable to reach you, so I'm warning you that I'm not afraid of what you can do or say. I mean to go through with my original idea and if you know what's good for you, you'll forget about that fifteen thousand dollars. The records don't prove a thing so watch your step.'* "

The rich contralto of her voice faltered and broke. "That was all. But do you wonder I was frightened?"

North's straight dark brows merged. "No. Did you ask your father about it?"

Virginia nodded. "Oh, yes, but he insisted it was only a joke. Ever since then he's been short tempered and jumpy and—and Daddy isn't a scary person."

"You didn't recognize the writing in that letter?"

"No, Hugh, the page was hurriedly typed and unsigned."

"Repeat the message, please," North asked, both to engrave the threat on his memory and to make sure that this was no hurried invention on the girl's part. Experience had long since taught him that liars, even practiced ones, are seldom able to repeat their lie word for word.

Virginia's repetition, surprisingly, did not vary by so much as a syllable.

"You'll forgive me? You see, Hugh, I really wasn't crying 'wolf'."

"This time," he said, and smiled.

"Oh, you are sweet!" Uttering a smothered little cry, Virginia flung her arms about his neck.

North gently led her back to her chair and offered a cigarette. "By the way, Virginia," he said, "that telegram of mine was delivered."

"What! Why, I didn't see it, I really didn't! I'll bet Cud'n Emily took it for me. She's dreadfully forgetful."

"You'd told her a mysterious someone was coming. Do you think she'd forget a thing like that?"

"I suppose not," Virginia admitted. "I wonder who did take it?"

"I'd give a lot to know," North said grimly, then continued with apparent irrelevancy. "Your father must be a very busy man."

"Oh, he is," Virginia said. "The firm's been busy lately and he's been doing well in the market. Stephanie was wishing Cliff would trade for himself—"

A violent squall pounced on Magnolia Hill, and shook the old mansion until the tall windows rattled. Ever sharper grew Hugh North's premonition—a premonition that again murder was ready to enter the plantation house.

"About your Uncle Billy," he said, "isn't he rather fond of Mrs. Prenderbury?"

"He's devoted to her in his old-fashioned way," Virginia smiled, smoothing the blue dress over her knees, "and has been for nearly twenty years. Trouble is, he's shy. That's why he lost her in the first place and went off to Mexico."

"What did he do there?" North asked.

"Helped to build a big power dam. You know, for electric current."

If William Mosby had been an electrical engineer in Mexico, North felt no need to comment on this discovery.

"And why is he called Uncle Billy?"

"Oh, he's an uncle of Stevie's. His mother was a Prenderbury and born right here in Magnolia Hill."

"I see, and does he live here regularly?"

"No, he's been on a 'plantation visit'." Virginia's laugh rippled forth like a satin ribbon unrolling. " 'Round here when we go visiting there's no telling whether we'll stay six hours or six months. Uncle Billy's leaving though. He doesn't want to complicate things during Daddy's wedding."

North got up from the chair he was sitting on. "Why don't you stay here, Virginia? I'd like to talk to your father for a few minutes," North said.

"Oh, do!" she said. "He'll be so glad to see you. He's terribly upset."

VI

THERE COULD BE no doubt that Scott Seabrook was laboring under a terrific tension, for as soon as Mrs. Lawton had departed he got up to splash a generous tot of bourbon into a glass.

"Well, Captain, my daughter Virginia did better than she realized when she invited you down here."

"I'm glad to be of use, Mr. Seabrook," North said and tugged at his neat black mustache. "Since our first concern is to forestall further tragedy, I wish you'd tell me if you've any firearms in the house —especially a twenty-two."

Seabrook smiled. "I've a twenty-two high-power," he said, "but I gave it to Stephanie to leave at the gunsmith in Charleston. The ejector was out of order. Why do you ask?"

"Because, Mr. Seabrook, I'm convinced that unless prompt measures are taken there's going to be another murder."

The white-haired man before him looked up sharply. "Murder! Impossible! Who could be in danger?"

"You," came the deliberate reply.

Never had North seen greater astonishment written on human features. "I?"

"Yes, so please tell me frankly it there's anything wrong with your business."

"Wrong, Captain?" Scott Seabrook ran his tongue over his upper lip. "Whatever gave you such an idea? Why, we have been coining money hand over fist."

"Then I'm to understand"— North considered the murky tumult beyond the open window— "that you've done well?"

"Yes. I bought in a few thousand shares of Aztec Copper at the right time and made a neat profit. Comes in handy these days."

Aztec Copper? Somewhere in

the dim recesses of North's memory a recollection stirred but refused to be identified.

"What about young Rowan, then?"

Virginia's father looked unhappy. "I don't pry into my partner's affairs, Captain."

No change of manner marked North's shift of tactics as he asked. "Have you noticed any hypodermics about this house?"

Scott Seabrook made a little gargling noise and sweat sprang out on his forehead as he gulped a mouthful of straight bourbon.

"I presume Stephanie has one in her nurse's kit. Why do you ask?"

North ignored the question to put another. "Does anyone of the household take insulin?"

Anger flared hot in Seabrook's bright blue eyes. "Really, Captain, I don't know! Why do you persist upon asking me all these questions?"

"I was wondering because two of the household take no sugar in their coffee," said North.

"Now that you mention it"—Seabrook's florid features had gone an unhealthy pink gray—"I do believe that Cousin Emily is troubled that way."

Leaving the matter there, North interrupted the loading of his pipe to lead the talk into other channels.

"I believe you said you were once a civil engineer?"

"Yes. Those were the days!" Seabrook sighed and visibly relaxed. "But it was no picnic building the Matto Grosso and Sao Paulo, what with snakes, Indians, and Yellow Jack."

"Indians?" North lingered on the word and stared into the crimson bowl of his pipe.

"Yes, nasty brutes, too. You'd be working when *zing* you'd get reed arrow in your back."

"That must have been fun."

"It was. We'd pull the damn things out and pray they'd no lagrimas on them. It'd be curtains if there were."

Lagrimas?"

"Yes. It's nice stuff made of decayed dog's liver impregnated with the juice of the antiaris plant and the venom of a small red toad. The natives call the stuff *las lagrimas delescuerzo rosa*, the Red Toad's Tears, and carry it about in rather pretty little amulets. Lots of people buy them for souvenirs without knowing what is in them. I had a couple of these amulets around—threw them away only last spring, in fact."

"Threw them away? Are you sure?"

"Yes," Seabrook declared firmly, "I did. I'm sure of it."

As his host continued, many of North's preconceived ideas dissolved like sand castles under the onslaught of a wave. So Seabrook had had Indian amulets in the house.

Firmly he reminded himself that knowledge of blood poisons was not confied to the South American Indians. The Zunis, Apaches, and Yaquis of the Southwest all were quite gifted in that respect. What if such knowledge flourished nearer at hand?

Reaching a sudden decision, Hugh North resettled his white coat and, preceded by his shadow thrown gigantic on the wall, started for the door.

"I'll be back soon," he said, "and by then I'll know who the murderer is."

"Are you sure?" Scott Seabrook finished the rest of his bourbon at a gulp.

"Yes. If I were you I'd not go strolling around."

"Why?"

"Everybody's nervous and—well, I just wouldn't."

So saying, North sought Stephanie Bartram in her room and had a most unsatisfactory interview. For her former sullenness, she substituted a caustic flippancy which did not help North.

"Of course, I had Scott's rifle," she said. "Didn't you notice it in my stocking?"

"Please, Miss Bartram—Let's talk about Mr. Rowan."

"Dear, dear Captain North, you disappoint me. Why ask me about him? she mocked. "Oh, Cliff's all right and besides he's smart. It takes a clever fellow to clean up in the stock market these days."

"Clean up?" North wondered.

"Cliff has done mighty well lately. It's gone to his head, or hasn't the great detective noticed it?"

"Yes. Virginia is lovely, isn't she?"

Scarlet swept into Stephanie's features. "You damned boor! Ginny's just a fool!" Stephanie blazed. "She can't hold him. Not when Lucretia knows—"

"Mrs. Lawton? Do I detect a jealous note?" Hugh North said, smiling.

"No, but she gets what she wants and pretty soon Cliff will be the one to buy her diamond bracelets and emerald rings! And won't dear Lucretia coo and slobber over him?"

"And take away your inheritance just the same?" North gibed. He was immediately contrite. Tragedy was poignant in the red-haired girl's eyes.

"She's not going to get it!" Savage was the set to Stephanie's bright lips. "Not that scheming greedy cat! Oh, damn her for coming here and spoiling our home! She'll tear us down like she wants to turn this grand old place inside out."

"Your Cousin Emily doesn't enjoy the prospect either," North suggested over the continuous tapping of rain on the window panes.

"No! Oh, if only she were a man!"

"She has your Uncle Billy."

"She has, but what can Uncle

Billy do? He's most as poor as we are and he's so gentle."

Hugh North, however, entertained certain odd convictions regarding gentle people with an old-fashioned concept of chivalry; but he said nothing.

"You wouldn't care to tell me how young Rowan made his money?"

"I don't know and I don't care! But he made it. Not that I care whether he's rich or poor as Job's turkey!" Then her reserve cracked badly. "I love him more than—well, I'm not letting any body take him from me. Get that straight, you damn snooper!"

"Thanks to you, dear Miss Bartram, I've now got a number of things straight," North said with a sardonic smile and hurried down to the library where he found Dr. Kane mechanically playing an intricate form of solitaire.

"Doctor, have you seen a daily paper about?"

"Yes, over there."

Grateful that this was Saturday evening and that he would therefore find a summary of the week's stock prices, North flung back the sheets and hurriedly sought the financial section. To his rising alarm he read that Aztec Copper had but a few days before risen eleven points!

"Here's bad news, Doctor, we'd better be—" he began. Then his voice became lost amid the heart-stilling crackle of a thunder-bolt, and, a split second later, every light in Magnolia Hill abruptly blinked out.

VII

"I HAVE A flashlight in my bag," came the doctor's voice. "Do you want it?"

"Very much. Let's get it. I don't like this," North grunted as, ignoring various startled cries, he followed the doctor towards Magnolia Hill's front hall.

Hugh North took the stairs three at a time and, hating dramatics, unostentatiously shifted the familiar .32 to his coat jacket.

"Please put out the flashlight," he requested when they found the upper hall plunged into an almost tangible darkness. There was small sense in inviting trouble.

Dr. Kane's hand closed on North's elbow with the force of a vise. "Look! Look down there!"

But North had already seen something just a little deeper black than the rest of the shadows drift out of Scott Seabrook's room and vanish down into the darkened hall. Instantly he started in pursuit and glimpsed the fugitive darting into a doorway further down.

"Keep flat to wall and turn on flash when I whistle," North advised his companion and thus presenting a minimum target approached that doorway in which the unknown was standing.

Balancing on the balls of his

feet for a quick leap to right or left he squatted and whistled a single soft note, whereupon Dr. Kane pressed the button of his flashlight.

"Why, why, Mr. Mosby," Dr. Kane gasped when his light's beam lit a tense white face. "What are you doing there?"

Uncle Billy failed signally in affecting a casual manner. "Why, Doctor, I reckon I was just goin' to get a candle out of Scott Seabrook's room."

"Which is your room?" asked North brusquely.

"Second door to the right, suh."

Right hand still lost in coat pocket, North borrowed the doctor's flash and directed it through the indicated door. Almost the first object it revealed was a candle set on the mantelpiece.

"Your explanation won't do, Mr. Mosby." Then sharply he added, "No, I wouldn't reach into that pocket!"

North turned to Dr. Kane and his voice was hard. "Please take the gun in his pocket and keep this man covered with it. I'll be back in a second."

Hugh North flicked out his light, dropped to his hands and knees and gently thrust open the door. He listened, and thanks to a lull in the storm was able to detect a faint *pat-pat-pat* which set the hairs to lifting on his neck.

Training Dr. Kane's flash towards the sound he flicked it on and uttered a surprise gasp. What lay before him was not a scarlet but a sable pool, into the center of which great jet drops were slowly falling to cause a spatter which had stained a pair of white shoes and the trouser cuffs above them.

Climbing slowly, North's light then illumined a hand dangling at the end of its arm with a peculiar laxness which the gaunt detective recognized with a pang of dismay.

Virginia Seabrook's worst fears had undoubtedly been realized. Loosely sprawled across his writing desk lay Scott Seabrook's big body, its silvery hair awry and its shoulders huddled together. One outflung arm had knocked over the inkstand and so created the ebon pool below.

A quick search of the bedroom, its closets and a bathroom beyond revealed nothing which leaped to the attention. Aware of a growing babel of voices, he lit three or four candles and called to Dr. Kane to bring in the prisoner.

The doctor appeared, grimly urging an agitated but very dignified Uncle Billy before him. Over the shoulders of these two, appeared a series of faces so tense and varied in expression that North had the impression of a collection of grotesque masks converging upon him.

"Daddy! Oh-h—!" Virginia's cry was heart-rendering as she started for the tragic figure before the writing desk and then slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

"May I!" Uncle Billy cast a quick glance at the doctor and, taking assent for granted knelt to lift the girl's head onto his lap.

Stephanie, standing straight as a candle, was seemingly deprived of all reaction. But her nostrils opened and shut convulsively like the gills of a stranded fish. Mrs. Prenderbury did not even enter the room but remained in the doorway, in her eyes a tense look of a trained nurse witnessing a critical operation.

As for young Rowan, he studied the scene with feverish interest, then crossed to Stephanie and put his arm about her tautly held shoulders. Lucretia Lawton stared with stricken eyes at the body of the man she was to have married so soon.

North would allow none of them, aside from Virginia, more than a step or so inside this room with its acid smell of spilt ink and its feeble yellowy flickering candle light.

"Mr. Seabrook is dead," he announced succinctly and then added, "You will all go to your rooms and stay there until the police arrive."

Personally, he carried Virginia's limp form to her room and left her with Mrs. Prenderbury in whose jet eyes shone a glitter as of many tiny knives.

"Where were you, Mrs. Prenderbury," North asked, "just before the lights went out?"

"In my room, packing," she said.

"Have you been in Mr. Seabrook's room all evening?"

"No. I know when not to bother people."

Lamenting that more pressing matters claimed his attention, North returned to Seabrook's room and subjected Uncle Billy to an expert search which yielded a curious object composed of a long darning needle the blunt end of which had been securely fixed into a lump of sewing wax.

"Well?" North grimly held up the device. "Where did you get this?"

"Mrs. Prenderbury gave it to me," Uncle Billy explained mildly. "You see, Captain, the canvas lining of my gun case had ripped and I had intended to sew it up. You can't arrest me for that," the old man declared.

"I don't suppose I can, Mr. Mosby," said the wiry figure confronting him, "but I can arrest you for driving these three inches of steel into the base of Scott Seabrook's brain."

"Into the medulla," Dr. Kane amplified.

"But I—I didn't," cried Uncle Billy, dropping his eyes. I was only going to sew—"

"That's splendid, Mr. Mosby, very credible," said North. "A murder has just been committed, and you suddenly take up sewing. Dr. Kane, please lock him in some

closet with a strong door and then send one of the servants for the police. Come back as soon as you can."

Left alone, he gathered the candles and by their inadequate light inspected that murderous implement William Mosby had fashioned from Mrs. Prenderbury's gifts. With a grimace of sickening disappointment, North noted no trace of any red substance on the needle's shank. It was very queer.

Seabrook's snow white hair was gleaming frostier than ever because now his skin was turning a deep plum color. Moreover, the wound and the swelling about it was identical with that which has caused Jameson's death, for among the silvery hairs on the back of Seabrook's neck a single drop of blood glowed like an evil ruby.

"He must have cleaned that needle, but where?" North mused. A cursory search, however, gave him no satisfaction and at last he paused undecided, his eye attracted by a gentle stirring of the murdered man's hair. Aware that rain was still beating in through the partially opened window, he closed it.

By the light of a candle held above the corpse he saw that death had stilled Seabrook's hand so swiftly that his pen, though broken in half, was still gripped in his fingers. Squarely under the body's head several sheets of stationery lay on the blotter—all of them perfectly blank. Consequently, North was deeply interested to observe that there were small imprints on the blank sheets, and that ink still wet the pen's point.

"What a horrible, horrible affair," said Dr. Kane, closing the door behind him. "And they all seem like such nice people here. You haven't any idea who did it?"

Plucking thoughtfully at his close cropped mustache, Hugh North nodded, "I have. But to prove it is something else again. I'd rather not say till we see if we can find a message Seabrook was writing and which the murderer removed."

Dr. Kane's lips were set in tight lines when he bent to survey the body. "What are our chances?"

"Poor. There's a fireplace in almost every room of this old place."

Gently, North lifted Seabrook's horribly bloated head and removed the top sheet of notepaper from beneath it. Lips compressed, he then held his specimen to the candle light. Nothing in the least legible materialized and he had no better luck when he played his flash over it from the sides and rear.

"What a shame poor Seabrook didn't use a pencil and bear down harder," Dr. Kane signed. "Not even you can read that impression, I'm afraid. What are you going to do, Captain?"

North hesitated, his gray-blue eyes roving over the disordered

desk until they came to rest on one or two drops of rain which had reached the desk's edge. He picked up once more the limp sample of note paper.

It was pretty soft and fortunately highly glazed. Given a decently equipped laboratory real results might be attained. But there was no laboratory nearer than Charleston.

"It all depends," he said as if to himself, "if there's an atomizer in the house."

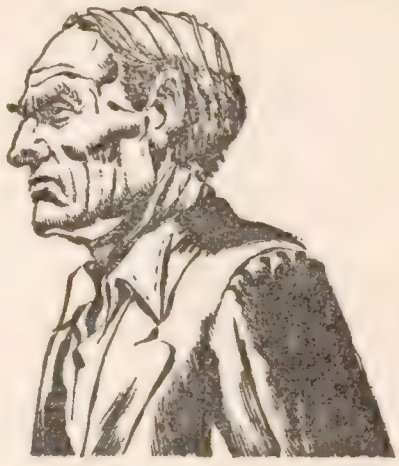
"An atomizer? The doctor's grizzled brows shot up. "What in the world do you want it for?"

"You'll see. What I need is a very fine vaporizer such as people use for treating head colds, asthma, and so forth. Then I'll want some iodine and plenty of adhesive. Mr. Rowan or some of the ladies might have some."

With a look of deep bewilderment in his eyes, Dr. Kane hurried out.

Much as North deplored the necessity, he was forced to leave Scott Seabrook's body unguarded by no more than an ordinary doorlock while he went down to the kitchen and ranged about until he found a large tin cracker box. Especially convenient was a little glass window in its front, designed to reveal the contents. Lastly he appropriated a can opener and returned back upstairs.

Dr. Kane was waiting for him in the hall, distinctly apprehensive.



"You'd better look out," he warned glancing over his shoulder. "I just met Rowan downstairs. He has a shotgun in his hands and an ugly look on his face."

"As if that will do him any good," came the level reply. "Come inside, Doctor. We've work to do."

In anxious silence, the country doctor watched North strip off his coat before carefully wiping out the cracker box. Next he used the can opener to cut a small round hole into one side of the box near its top. This done, he held to the candle light a nasal vaporizer Dr. Kane produced, and then quickly rinsed out its container before he measured a few drops of iodine into it. These he presently diluted with water until the container was half full of a pale amber fluid.

"Please hold the flashlight," he said and tried the atomizer. Immediately a light golden haze went

drifting across the room. North nodded.

"It may do," he said. "Let's have have that adhesive."

Using great care, he clipped the sheet from beneath Seabrook's head to a length of cardboard, removed from the bosom of a dress shirt in the dead man's bureau, and propped it at about an 80 degree angle inside the cracker box. The container's lid he then made comparatively air-tight with a bank of adhesive and, using the same material, sealed the vaporizer's nozzle to the hole he had cut.

"Where did the adhesive come from?" North asked.

"Some from Mrs. Prenderbury and the rest from Mrs. Lawton. I was afraid there wouldn't be enough. It was so so narrow. Apparently three-eights is the standard width around here. I didn't dare tackle young Rowan."

"I don't blame you. Now, Doctor, please direct your flashlight into that little window."

Gently, North squeezed the atomizer's bulb and squatted on his heels staring into the lighted box and watching the downward drift of the vapor particles. He continued to squeeze the vaporizer's bulb at intervals until the letter and the box's interior were all but lost to sight amid a lazily floating yellow mist.

"If it's going to work at all, that should do it," North said and, straightening, lit a cigarette. "It'll take some minutes for the vapor to settle. In the meanwhile, we'll see if we can find a rag or a piece of paper with a red smear on it."

With the powerful, restless stride of a caged leopard North paced back and forth, now regarding Seabrook's body, now peering into the waste basket and occasionally stealing a glance at the cracker box.

At last he said with a faint smile, "We mustn't be too disappointed if there's nothing. Our apparatus is pretty primitive and after all Seabrook might have not yet started to write."

Anxious lines, however, hovered about his mouth when he gingerly pulled off curling strips of adhesive. Then he lifted out the paper and cardboard now stained a deep and even yellow.

"My God!" Dr. Kane burst out. "How is it possible?"

Faintly brown but perfectly legible, line after line of a closely written message had materialized. "The page was absolutely blank. Why, damn it, this is incredible!" exclaimed the amazed doctor.

"The explanation is simple enough," North said. "Thanks to the open window all the writing paper on the desk was damp—so damp that the pressure of Seabrook's penpoint on the page above was enough to disturb minute surface particles on the sheet beneath. This page like most ex-

pensive note papers made of rags was particularly sensitive. It contains long fibers which, on being disturbed out of the bed of glazing, project and catch down-drifting particles of the vapor."

"It's very pale," Dr. Kane said dubiously. "Do you think we can read it?"

"The fibres will turn darker as they dry."

Under the judiciously applied heat of two candles, the note paper gradually dried and turned a pale amber.

Bending like schoolboys over a forbidden book, both men read: *My darling Virginia*:

Isn't it one of life's supreme ironies that you, loving me as you do, should have brought your own father to justice? I can't begin to tell you how greatly I regret the disgrace that I have brought upon you. Try to forgive me and realize that I'm attempting restitution by the only means I can.

Only chance saved me from committing more serious crimes than embezzlement; a lurch of the car, and North's surprising quickness alone saved his life on the road from Queen's Oak.

Honeybunch, I bought Aztec Copper short and staked everything on a slump. But it went up and to cover my margin, I took money from some clients' accounts for, thanks to some recent extravagancies, I hadn't any ready money of my own. Somehow Jameson came to suspect and tonight he threatened to expose me if I did not immediately make restitution, though I told him with a little more time I was sure I could pay back the embezzled sum.

Well, I can, and I will. My life insurance is very heavy and is made out to you and Stephanie. Please pay back my clients with it. There'll be plenty left over so look out for Cousin Emily.

Before I shoot myself, I must tell you that poor Jameson was killed with poison from an amulet I'd brought back from South America. I recognized the symptoms at once, but didn't dare say anything. Please believe, my darling, that I had no willing part in his death. To kill a stranger is one thing, but to murder a life-long friend is—" The letter ended.

VIII

THE STORM'S TUMULT was diminishing rapidly when into the oak panelled warmth of the library filed the household, some willingly, some sullenly. Rowan, deprived of his shotgun after a clash of wills with North, hovered alert and dangerous at Stephanie Bartram's side, and Uncle Billy walked stiffy before Dr. Kane, his face faded and crumpled looking, like a Japanese lantern with its candle gone out.

"Well, Captain," Rowan began

truculently, "to what do we owe this particular session?"

North made no immediate reply but cast a compassionate look at Virginia sobbing softly and sunk so deep in an arm chair as to seem deflated. Mrs. Prenderbury was scowling nervously, her features the color of old ivory and her black eyes restlessly flitting about the room. As for Mrs. Lawton, she sat tense and her eyes never left North's gaunt features.

"I have here," North touched the yellowed sheet of note paper, "a confession written by Mr. Seabrook. I am going to read it to you." Though low pitched, North's voice rang loud in the silence which descended.

"I'm sure you all now see why the murderer didn't hesitate to kill Scott Seabrook in order to silence him and to suppress the original of this."

"But," Mrs. Prenderbury pointed out, "Mr. Seabrook didn't have time to name Mr. Jameson's murderer."

"Ah, but he did," North quickly corrected. "There was a second sheet which the killer didn't notice—"

"You're lying!" Mrs. Lawton cried in shrill triumph. "There wasn't any second sheet! There was only one!"

Tension spread in the room like a flood of water as Hugh North made a little deprecatory gesture. "You're quite right, Mrs. Lawton, I am lying. But, please, just how could you be so sure there was no second page?"

"Why, why—" Wildly she stared about and attempted to recover. "You showed us only one sheet—I—I don't know what you're talking about. I just spoke on impulse."

"No doubt. And on impulse you murdered Seabrook when he refused to keep quiet about your killing his partner."

"What's that? What are you saying?" Dr. Kane cried. "She killed Jameson?"

"Yes. Seabrook told her that Jameson knew everything."

"He's lying!" screamed Mrs. Lawton, suddenly terror stricken. "Scott told me nothing!"

"Oh, but he did," declared North inexorably. "Or you'd never forced his hand by silencing Jameson. You wanted Seabrook's secret kept until he could extricate himself from the mess into which your greediness and his generosity had plunged him! You desperately wanted this place and all that went with it, and you killed a man rather than lose it."

"I didn't! I didn't, you devil!" Shaking with fury, Lucretia Lawton sprang to her feet. "Scott killed him!"

"How?" North snapped.

"With poison from an Indian trophy!"

A grin of satisfaction lit Hugh North's countenance. "Ah, I see

you recognized those amulets for what they really were." He risked a shrewd lie. "Isn't it too bad that the gum on the adhesive you used to fasten your hypodermic's point to Jameson's chair perfectly matches a sample you gave to Dr. Kane. The other lengths were of a darker gray."

Like a harpy Mrs. Lawton shrilled, "He's lying! He's making all this up!"

"Ah, but I'm not. You see I'm certain a clever chemist is going to find a trace of insulin on that needle point you used."

"Well, he won't," snarled the woman in green. "It was boiled."

"Oh, was it?" North chuckled as Mrs. Lawton turned deathly pale. "Isn't it nice to find that out before so many reputable witnesses?"

IT WAS A sunny morning when Captain North, in company with Uncle Billy, approached the portico of Magnolia Hill. Judiciously he surveyed a lawn all littered with broken branches and wet leaves and reflected that in much the same fashion the storm which had raged within the plantation house had also blown itself out, leaving wreckage behind.

An hour before Mrs. Lawton, alternately hysterical and defiant had been driven away by a pair of state policemen and since dawn Virginia Seabrook had lain in her big room and thanks to an opiate, lost to tragic realities.

Uncle Billy Mosby drew a deep breath and expelled a sigh. "It's—it's a glorious mornin', isn't it, Captain? For me especially, suh, because," he shrugged a little as he lit a slender cigar, "I had made up my mind that Emily should not be driven from her home on account of a woman who was not even a lady."

North drew several little puffs on his pipe as, skirting the puddles, he descended the steps and started off down the long drive.

"It was you who tore away the telephone, wasn't it?"

William Mosby blinked before jerking a nervous little nod. "Yes, I reckoned if the police came, I'd have no chance to—"

"To kill Seabrook," North finished. "By the way, was it coincidence that you, too, were going to use a needle?"

"No, Captain, not quite. You see, down in Mexico I'd seen people hurt like Jameson was and knew he'd been poisoned. Since there was no arrow hole or other wound to be seen right off, I reckoned he must have been poisoned by a small wound—Like a needle might make."

Stooping, Uncle Billy brushed rain spattered loam from the bright face of a pansy. "Somewhere in a book once I read how a man could be killed by drivin' a needle into the base of his skull." He straightened slowly and looked up into the sky. "God has been very kind to

me, suh, so I think I'll go down by the pool. I—I need to give thanks."

Hugh North, very neat in his gray flannels, smiled. "I understand, Mr. Mosby, and think I'll take a stroll down to the stables. That horse of Rowan's is the grandest thing I have seen in a month of Sundays."

He was rounding a wisteria-smothered corner of the former slave quarters when a low voice called his name and he beheld Stephanie Bartram waiting as if she had expected his arrival. Her eyes were red, but the sullen look was gone.

"Good morning, Captain," she murmured, "I—I just wanted to tell you how awful sorry I am I wasn't more of a help to you last night. But what with the prospect of losing this place and Cliff at the same time, I was near crazy. Reckon I acted just like an ornery brat. I should have told you, when you asked, that Scott never did give me that rifle."

He laid a reassuring hand on her arm. "Forget it, but remember one thing; when a crisis comes along, it doesn't always pay to be selfish."

He paused watching a nearby catbird give grim battle to a singularly pink and resilient worm. "Why wouldn't you tell me how you got that scratch?"

"I—I was ashamed."

"To confess you'd been spying on Virginia and Cliff?"

She averted a flaming face. "I—I reckon that's about the size of it, Captain. You see I overheard Cliff tell Tim Boykin he'd go over to see the puppies after he rode over to Rosetree with Ginny. I wanted to catch Cliff alone and talk to him.

"Well, they were still together when they passed my hiding place and I near died of jealousy. I did see Cliff later, in the dining room when Mr. Jameson was dying, but he wouldn't pay any heed because he was sure his partner had been murdered. He even went crawling all around under the table looking for—I don't know what. That was the last straw and I just about went wild and even yet he hasn't spoken to me. If only I didn't love him so damn much!" She broke into a sobbing so sadly soft that North put a comforting arm about her shoulders.

"I wouldn't worry too much, Stevie," he said. "I noticed it was you he stood beside when the showdown came last night. I think he'd have killed anybody who even looked cross-eyed at you."

She raised brimming eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it." North smiled. "I'm supposed to be a detective—remember! In fact right now I deduce—thanks to good eyesight—that young Mr. Rowan is heading this way as fast as he can, and I don't want him to catch me with my arm around you."

Doc Plummer had paid his debt to society in full . . . for the strangest of crimes.

"MY DIAGNOSIS IS—"

by

PETER

OPPENHEIM

WHEN DOC PLUMMER returned to his former home after eighteen years in the Big House he did not anticipate that he would be welcomed with open arms.

Not that anyone had particularly mourned the discovery of Jim Alden's charred remains in the smouldering skeleton of Plummer's summer house the day before Plummer had been charged with the crime. Or that a certain measure of sympathy had not veered paradoxically to the young surgeon, when Plummer was found dead drunk in his room, his revolver on the floor, his fingerprints on the butt. There had been two bullets missing from the gun and both of them had been found embedded in the corpse.

The town had been fully aware of the young M. D.'s blind infatuation for Alden's wife, and of Plummer's infrequent, but crazy drunken sprees. But Doc had been regu-

lar in a lot of ways, and Alden had been a stinker, if there ever was one.

It was one thing, however, to sympathize with a man who had paid his debt to society, and quite another to trust your life and those of your kids to his hands. And Dr. Plummer, no longer young, his face deeply-lined, read the verdict in his neat little expense book, and stared out into the night, drumming softly on the desk.

So it was no go, after all. He had been crazy to try it. Luckily the income from his mother's estate would keep him going, with what little business he could eke out on the side. But a bare livelihood was a tragically poor substitute for professional respect and work in which a man could take pride.

The harsh *br-r-r-r* of the telephone broke into his reverie. He groped absently for the receiver. "Hello," he said.

"Doc!" the metallic wire-distorted voice held a subdued undercurrent of excitement. "Doc! I want you to come out to the old Melville lodge on Elk's Pond—at once. It's a case of ptomaine, I'm afraid. Please hurry!"

"Right!" Plummer mechanically jotted the directions on his memo pad. "What's the name?"

"Oh—" For the barest instant the voice paused. "It's someone who remembers you—from the old days. Hurry!" The instrument clicked with an air of finality.

Nils Plummer swore softly as he picked up his kit. All of sixty miles through the worst roads in the state. Then his face softened. Someone who had needed him in the past had called again for help. The voice had stirred a vague chord of memory.

Nearly three hours later his ancient car jolted to a stop before an old but substantial log lodge nestled deep in the pine forest. Doc Plummer emerged, chill and stiff, and stretched his cramped shoulder muscles luxuriously. Quite a layout. The man who had phoned him was certainly the opposite of impoverished.

But a dwelling so remote, he told himself, had one serious disadvantage. It was a very bad place to reside in if you were desperately ill and in need of a physician.

The transition from purple blackness to the white brilliance within was too sudden for his tired old eyes, and at first the man who huddled behind the large table was a blurred figure. Then as Plummer's eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the glare, he started violently, and his fingers clutched the doorknob for support.

"You!" he gasped incredulously, as he struggled to keep his trembling body erect.

The man in the chair behind the large table laughed, and the laugh held no vestige of mirth. Plummer knew that brittle laugh. It metamorphosed the little weaz-

ened creature with sudden clarity from a spectral apparition into an equally impossible reality.

"Right the first time—James Norton they call me around here. Jim Alden to you—you two-timing heel! When I heard that my old friend was free, I came back here a couple of months ago with a new name. I couldn't resist—" He broke off abruptly, and let his little eyes gloat over the ravages time and harsh circumstances had made in Plummer's once handsome face.

"But I've spent eighteen long years in hell, because you died!" the doctor murmured weakly. "I don't understand—"

"Of course you don't, Plummer," Alden said. "Toss your coat over the gun-rack."

Plummer obeyed mechanically, still in a state of shock.

"Now, Doc, sit down—right over there." Alden pointed to a chair, and Plummer noticed for the first time the revolver which the other had laid on the table before him.

Again he obeyed.

"Remember Elsie, Doc?" Alden went on slowly, and with satisfaction noted Plummer's white knuckles strain against the arms of the chair. "Elsie died a month after you were convicted. The shock—the horror of it was too much for her weak heart. I wanted you to squirm before my face." He paused and let his fingers rest lightly on the butt of the revolver for an instant

"Well," Alden resumed, "you're a calm one when you're sober. But alcohol could always turn you into a dangerous madman. I want to see you that way—with the old unreasoning rage creeping into your eyes when somebody you don't like crosses your drunken path. Remember how the district attorney brought that out at your trial? You even hit me once when you were stoned."

Alden did things with a decanter and seltzer. "Two tall ones, well chilled. You used to like 'em that way." Alden picked up the gun and waved it before Plummer. "I want to see the pulse throb in your forehead. I want to see you so enraged you really *would* kill me —if you could. Only this time you can't.

"Just a few drinks together, you and me—and then I'll answer all those wild questions you've been asking yourself. So help me God, if you move from that chair once, I'll shoot you without a scruple. Now—" he pushed a glass across the table—"drink, my friend."

Plummer stared, gulped and drank deeply, while the other continued to regard him steadily.

THE CLOCK astride the white mantel had ticked away a full hour. The two men still sat as before. Alden was slowly mellowing from the effects of the Scotch, but

Plummer—well, eighteen years of abstinence followed by nine stiff highballs could bring about a very rapid kind of intoxication. His lank figure wavered ever so slightly in his seat.

Alden was tormenting Plummer slowly, dragging it out to every subtle finesse of cruelty of which his mind was capable. He had explained how he had discovered the body of a tramp in a hedge on the night of the supposed murder and had transported it in his car under cover of darkness to Plummer's house.

"You never knew, did you, Doc, that my drinks that night were spilled into the vase beside my chair. I had business to do. When you finally passed out, I put the hobo in the summer house, and poured gasoline over his body.

"Then I fired a couple of shots into the body, returned to the house, and wrapped your fingers around the gun butt. After that—You probably can guess it.

"I set fire to the body, waited until I was sure the summer house would go up in flames and skipped town forever. Next day I read I was dead."

Plummer stared at him dully, the veins on his forehead thick blue cords. "So you deliberately framed me!" Plummer enunciated the words slowly, thickly. "You sent me to prison for eighteen years for a crime I never committed."

Alden clapped his palms together in mock applause. "Always right, Doc," he said. "At first I wanted to kill you. Maybe I could have. But the way I chose was safer for me—and more effective. I didn't want you to die. I wanted you to live, and suffer."

"Jim," stammered Plummer jerkily, "there's one thing you seem to have overlooked. Do you realize that I have paid my debt to the State for killing you? If I killed

you now, or tomorrow, or at any time no jury on earth could convict me? The law says, 'No man's life may be placed in jeopardy twice for the same crime."

"You can't kill me now, or at any time—because you will be dead. They'll find your body somewhere along the state road. You couldn't live down the disgrace of prison. You got cockeyed drunk and shot yourself. As simple as that!"

Alden, for no apparent reason, suddenly slumped back into his chair, groaning, and was holding his right hand pressed to his side. In spite of his fury, Plummer's professional training noted the sudden pallor, the spasmodic diaphramic reflexes, the right leg doubled up almost to his abdomen.

"You'd better let me look at you." Plummer said. Lurching slightly, he walked towards Alden, who stiffened as he approached. Fear crept into the latter's narrowed eyes.

"Wait," Alden cried, his bony fingers tightening convulsively about the blue steel butt of the gun. "I've got you covered. If you want to find out what is causing this pain—I'll allow you to make a diagnosis. But if you try anything . . ." His voice trailed off into a smothered cry of pain.

The examination required but a moment. Doc Plummer arose, a queer glint in his eyes. "You'd best postpone my little suicide party, and place yourself in my care," he said. "You have acute appendicitis, beyond any possibility of doubt. It's a great pity you forced me to disregard the first tenets of a surgeon about—liquor. You see, Jim, you'll never reach a hospital in time.

"In about twenty minutes your pain will disappear suddenly and you'll think the attack is over. But it will only be the release of pressure caused by the bursting of the pus-choked sac. By the time you get on an operation table you'll have a raging fever, and peritonitis will have set in. In your present alcoholic state—"

"For the love of God, Nils, save me!" In spite of himself, the words rushed unbidden to Jim Alden's lips.

"Yes, Jim," Plummer said. "I'll have to operate right now, to be best of my present ability. It's your only chance. I'm not really drunk, you know." As if in ironic contradiction, his none-too-steady grasp on the chair alone kept him upright as he uttered the reassuring words.

"No, damn you," cried Alden, reaching for his topcoat with his free arm. "*Not* drunk! That's what you used to say in the old days, when you couldn't even walk. I don't believe you, damn you! I've slight indigestion, that's all. But I'm going to a hospital to make sure!"

Despite his agony, a bleak

deadly rage flamed in Alden's eyes. "You're going part way, understand?" he exclaimed. *"Only part way*. Then, you'll be lying cold in a ditch, looking up at the sky."

Plummer stiffened as if in sudden horror. "Merciful God, man!" he cried. "Your side—rigor vaso already!" He pointed with a fascinated intensity at Alden's middle. "Not even an operation can save you now—"

Alden's eyes widened in sheer panic as he looked fearfully at the spot Plummer had indicated.

It was the moment Niles Plummer had been waiting for. His wiry bulk catapulted across the intervening space, throwing the lighter man completely off-balance and sending him careening heavily back against the massive walnut highboy. Just as Alden's head met the heavy antique drawer hinge with a dull resounding thud Plummer closed with him and wrenched the gun from his clasp.

A moment later Plummer was stooping over the unconscious Alden, probing a still intact appendix with sensitive fingers. Then he arose and crossed to the phone.

"Sheriff Harkings? This is Doc Plummer. Get up to Melville's—fast—and bring a nurse and a deputy. I've got a prisoner for you, but he can't be moved for a week. He is"—he corrected himself—*"will* be convalescing from a serious operation . . . Right. Explain later . . . Sure, I'll swear out the warrant . . . My voice sounds damned funny? Maybe it does! I'm about to operate on a ghost!"

Plummer clicked the receiver down as the other voice still held forth in querulous tempo. His diagnosis of rigor vaso hadn't meant anything but it had sure sounded impressive, and certainly scared Jim Alden.

On his way to scald the instruments in the kitchen, Doc Plummer paused for a fleeting moment. A sardonic smile crept almost imperceptibly across his face as he regarded a big urn beside the chair he had occupied during most of the eventful evening. In it were innumerable cigarette stubs and match ends, floating idly on what had been nine good glasses of Scotch.

COMING SOON: ANOTHER STORY BY PETER OPPENHEIM

FRESH COFFEE

by

EDWIN P. HICKS

Mary Ann didn't really enjoy becoming the victim of a hard-eyed holdup man. But it had compensations . . . of a sort.

THE WOMAN IN charge of the road-side restaurant knew that the man in the front booth was both dangerous and desperate. He was a young man, and she could see his cold gray eyes studying her from beneath the rim of his battered, rain-soaked hat. He was badly in need of a haircut, and his cheeks were covered with a three-days' growth of stubble. He had stopped in on pretext of drinking a cup of coffee, but she knew that he meant to rob the place.

It was a miserable, rain-swept night, and she was completely alone. None of the trucks were stopping. Pulling up and getting wet just didn't appeal to the drivers of the big trailers, when the overnight stop for most of them was just a hundred miles down the road. And the pick-ups and the little jobs had stopped moving for the night.

That was one of the reasons Big Tobe had gone into town—lack of business—and perhaps a floozy he had staked out. Anyhow Big Tobe was gone, and she was alone, and this tight-lipped, silent man in the booth was dangerous.

Mary Ann—that was the name she displayed on the upper left front of her white waitress uniform—sat on a stool in back of the cash register. She was in her late thirties and had once been pretty. Some people would still consider her pretty perhaps, for

her eyes were round and dark, her lips full, and heavily coated with lipstick.

Abruptly the man rose and crossed to the cash register, his eyes trained on her face. He fumbled in the pocket of his soiled coat and then whipped out a snub-nose revolver.

"Hand over the money," he said. "This is a hold-up!"

Mary Ann laughed. She pressed a key on the cash register and the drawer opened. "It's all yours Buddy," she said. "Help yourself."

Keeping the gun pointed at Mary Ann, the robber lifted the stack of greenbacks from the cash register. Then he began grubbing up the silver. His hands were strangely white and soft.

Mary Ann watched with an amused smile—watched the soft, white left hand clawing up the quarters and the dimes and the nickles. "That's chicken feed—" she began.

"Shut up! I know you're alone here, so don't try to con me. I got to have this money." His voice began in a whine and ended in a snarl.

"I was going to tell you," Mary Ann said, "that that is chicken feed to what you could earn if you played ball with me." She crossed her legs and smoothed her uniform down over her knees with exaggerated modesty.

"Yeah?"

"I've been waiting for just the right guy to come along. I've got a big paying job for some one. You look like you'll do."

"Spill it sister. I haven't got all night."

"How would you like to work in a lonesome road-side dump like this all the time?"

"Not me."

"Then you can guess how I feel. I used to be alive. I used to get a kick out of living. Look at me—I'm still a young woman, but I ain't alive anymore. I'm dead. I've been dead for months, working in this hole."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Sit down again. I'll pour you another cup of coffee. I just made some fresh in the urn."

"You don't stall me like that sister. I'm on my way."

She looked at him with a lot of meaning in her eyes.

"Well?"

"You big dope," she said. She smiled and poured another cup of coffee for him. "Don't you know nothing?" Her voice was almost a whisper. "What kind of pie does a good looking guy like you go for?"

"Apple," he answered mechanically. He sat down on a stool at the counter. "Your name's Mary Ann?"

"Yes," she said, nodding and placing the pie before him.

The revolver disappeared into the man's coat pocket.

"My husband who runs this

place," Mary Ann said, "is a brute. He is mean to me and works me like a slave. I hate his guts."

"What's that to me, Mary Ann? Come on, put it on the line."

She went back and sat behind the cash register. "I want somebody to kill him."

The robber stopped eating. He said nothing.

"They call him Big Tobe. To me he's just a big toad. He works me like a slave. There's supposed to be a State law that protects women workers against long hours. But it don't protect a wife. He runs off two or three nights a week and leaves me with the front and back both to manage. He's got some floozy in town. I made up my mind long ago to kill him. But a woman can't manage such a thing all by herself."

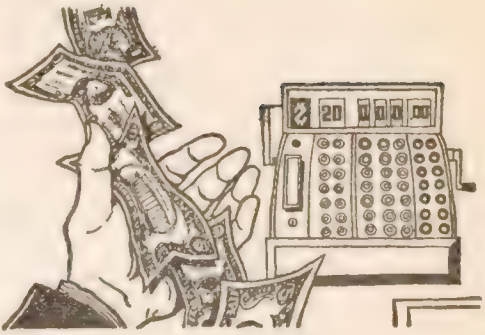
"You're plenty cold-blooded," the robber said.

"You think so?" She smiled. "I could be awful nice to a man who would help me out. I got it all planned how to do it—but it will take a *man*. My husband's got plenty of insurance. I'll give you a thousand dollars if you'll do the job for me. Then you can go your way, and I'll go mine."

The robber's cold eyes narrowed. "Now it's my time to say chicken feed."

"A thousand dollars is chicken feed?"

"Make it three thousand, and I might be interested."



"Two thousand."

"Two thousand, five hundred. Cash on the barrel."

"I ain't got a cent until I can sell this cafe after you do the job. You know it will take weeks for the insurance to pay off."

"I'll think it over. Now I got to be going. Sorry I got to keep this money. But look at me—you can see I'm hard up."

"That's all right. There'll be more where that comes from. I can keep you in spending money, but I haven't got any big amount. Come back as soon as you can."

"Sometime, maybe."

Mary Ann gave him that smile again. It was just like she was opening the door to her bedroom.

The robber jumped into his car and drove towards the city. A few minutes later a big, new coupe came roaring around the bluff curve of the highway and parked at the side of the restaurant. Mary Ann cursed inwardly as her fat husband lumbered through the door.

TWO NIGHTS later the robber returned. He was wearing a flashy sports coat, and contrasting, neatly creased slacks. He also had a haircut and was clean-shaven. He opened the door with his left hand. His right hand remained in the pocket of his sports coat.

Mary Ann grinned. Her left eye was discolored and slightly swollen. It had been black.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Black," he said.

She placed the coffee and a piece of apple pie before him.

"He accused me of giving the money to a lover while he was gone," she whispered as she served him. She didn't look up. "He beat hell out of me. He's back there now. Be careful. Act like you never been here before."

Mary Ann placed a slug in the juke box and came back behind the counter and busied herself wiping up an imaginary spot directly in front of him.

As the music began to play she warned: "Don't look at me. Don't even speak to me. You know you can trust me now. He's got a loaded shotgun back there and would blow your head off if I gave you away."

The robber's right hand went back into his coat pocket. His eyes glowed green.

"I'll get away somehow tomorrow afternoon. Gee, you sure do look cute tonight. You got the whitest, softest hands. I bet you never did a hard day's work in your life."

"Don't try to trap me baby. These white hands can handle a rod."

"Be careful. He's looking right this way. I'll—I'll meet you at the Rex theatre tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock. Back row, way over on the left side. Drink your coffee now and leave."

When he paid her at the cash register, she slipped a fifty-dollar bill from the pocket of her uniform and into his hand. "That's something you missed the other night. I told him it was all stolen."

It was a rainy night a week later when the bandit reappeared at the restaurant. This time he was clean-shaven, but he was wearing the same disreputable clothes he had worn the night of the hold-up, and he was sopping wet and muddy.

"It's sure wet tonight," said Mary Ann.

"It sure is, sister. Had to fix a flat down the road apiece."

"What'll it be?"

"Black coffee and apple pie."

She served the coffee and pie, and as she placed it on the counter before him, the robber spoke in a whisper: "It's all fixed."

"Wait," Mary Ann said. She placed another slug in the juke box and came back and stood directly across the counter from him.

"The way he drives he'll go off the bluff at the turn down there—like a stone from a sling-shot. He

ain't got a sign of a brake now."

The robber forked a quarter of the piece of pie into his mouth. "This is mighty good pie," he said. "You know how to cook, baby."

"You sure he'll go off?"

"I told you I fixed his brakes, didn't I?"

"That big toad!" she said. "That big, fat toad! Honey I love you. You'll see."

"You ought to. It sure was a muddy job out there in the rain. I'll probably catch a cold from it."

"Well, stay in where it's warm a bit. There's no hurry. I'll make you some fresh coffee. Yours was the last cup in the urn. Got to fill it up again."

She went back into the kitchen, humming a tune. She picked up a large pail.

Big Tobe was washing his hands. "Going to town honey," he told her. "Got a little deal I'm working on.

"Say, I believe you got a girl in town you're seeing. You go in there and leave me all the work to do."

"Stop whining. So help me God, you whine all the time. So I got a girl, have I? What about you chinning with every good-for-nothing tramp that buys a cup of coffee? I been watching you in there tonight. You start right off by giving them ideas."

"Now dear, don't you go getting all worked up. I know what happened the last time."

"So do I. I'm out a hundred and fifty bucks."

Mary Ann filled the pail nearly full of boiling water, whisked her skirts and returned to the front. Holding a cloth beneath the pail to pour the boiling water into the urn, she turned suddenly, appeared to stumble, and emptied the scalding water upon the robber.

He cried out like a tortured animal and fell to the floor where he writhed in agony. Mary Ann put her hands to her cheeks and screamed.

"Call an ambulance!" Big Tobe shouted.

"Can't! The 'phone has been out of order all afternoon!"

Big Tobe lifted the agonized young man and ran with him to his big coupe parked by the side of the restaurant. In a moment the coupe was roaring down the wet and slippery highway, headed for the city and the nearest hospital.

Mary Ann waited breathlessly. There was a terrible crash from the vicinity of the bluff-curve down the highway—a horrible rattling and scraping sound, as if an avalanche had started down the side of the mountain.

Mary Ann smiled and went to get a mop.

As she started to clean up the mess on the floor she saw the billfold. It had fallen out of the young robber's pocket as he writhed on the floor. Hurriedly she picked it up. Inside was the fifty dollar bill,

a five, and a one, and in one of the compartments was the carbon copy of a typewritten letter, dated the day before. The letter, without any address whatever, was as follows:

Dear Joe: I've had a break and hope to pay you back that couple of hundred bucks within two or three weeks. I'm working with a dame, and she'll pay off to the tune of two and a half grand. But boy; she's a mean bitch and I don't trust her. If I don't call you by 10 o'clock Thursday night, give the enclosed, sealed envelope to Sheriff Charlie Roberts. Him and some insurance companies will want to talk to her. If I do call, that will mean you are getting your two hundred and then I want you to burn the letter . . . SID.

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DEATH FROM THE SKY by ARTHUR PORGES

A LETTER FROM ED NOON by MICHAEL AVALLONE

. . . and a Happy New Year

by RICHARD HARDWICK

The house was filled with New Year guests who had a rare zest for living. . . until Death moved in.

WOULD you like to see the newspaper?"

"Sure," Robert Mason said. He took the paper and sat down and adjusted his glasses.

The first thing he looked at was the dateline, even though he was well aware as to what day it was. Nevertheless, as if seeking absolute confirmation, he sought out the data. Wednesday, December 26th . . .

It was over. At least there was that to be thankful for. Three hundred and sixty-four more days until Christmas. All the fake jollity done with for another year.

And the relatives that seemed to come from the cracks in the walls like swarms of cockroaches. A free boozing—that was what Christmas meant to them. What's-his-name the red-nosed reindeer couldn't hold a candle to Cousin Charlie.

Mason rattled the paper and glanced over the headlines. The Russians were still up to their old tricks. Nothing he could do about that. There were a great many things you couldn't do anything about, so there was really no point in getting yourself in a lather about them.

The traffic death toll was five percent above expectations. Mas-

on vowed to drive more carefully on holidays, and then he dismissed that problem, having done his part toward its solution.

His eyes lifted slowly from the paper and he scratched at his lower lip with his thumbnail. The big house, he told himself, had probably been the main factor. He had told Betty when they were looking for a place that they ought to get something smaller.

"We don't need so many rooms," he'd said. "What are we going to do with all this space?"

"I just want them," Betty said. "Maybe Aunt Marion can come to see us now—or Cousin Beulah."

"Beulah? With all those children?"

Betty put her hand on her hips. "Robert, you act like you were still making five thousand a year instead of fifty!"

"The money's got nothing to do with the way I feel. Besides, don't you think a man who makes fifty thousand is entitled to at least as much consideration as a man who makes five?"

"You're not making sense. What's the point?"

"A little word called privacy. Peace. If they want to come here from all over the country, I'll be happy to pay for a motel for the spongers who can't afford it. This house is too damn big. It's asking for trouble."

"I like the house, Robert. I *want* the house."

Mason bought the house. Each of the three children now had a room to himself. The dog had his own room. Robert and Betty moved into the vast master bedroom, and in less than a week Betty's Cousin Elinor was entrenched in the east guest room.

"She'll just be here a few days, Robert," said Betty. "She's looking for a job."

"I can get a job at the plant. We're crying for clerks and typists."

"The girl is artistically inclined," Betty had said.

ROBERT MASON laid the newspaper aside and leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. Cousin Elinor had been with them two months before she finally took a typing job with a third-rate art gallery at a salary which was not adequate for housing *plus* the niceties of life. So she stayed on in the east guest room. By then Aunt Bess and Uncle Caleb were already in firmly established occupancy in the west guest room.

Mason had put up with the situation simply with an eye toward keeping peace in the family. Even when Aunt Marion took up residence in the south guest room, the situation had remained precariously under control. It hadn't been until a week before Christmas that the trouble really started.

That was when Charlie and May came and unpacked in the

north room. May had done the unpacking. Good old Charlie had homed in as unerringly as a bloodhound on the liquor cabinet. In less than half a minute he had located the bottle of really fine Scotch that Mason kept in a corner behind the ordinary stuff.

"They've got no children of their own," Betty explained later. "We have three. Shouldn't we be willing to share just a little? Especially during the Yule season?"

Mason started to suggest that the following year each of the children be sent to a childless relative. But instead, he sighed and went into the den to watch a football game on television.

When Cousin Charlie came in just before the kickoff, a tall drink in his right hand, Mason saw that just behind Cousin Charlie, also enjoying the Yuletide season, were Uncle Ned and Cousin Lester, who was really only a third cousin once removed, but who was not letting a technicality stand in his way.

Four days before Christmas every room in the house was filled, and five cots had been set up in the upstairs hall because the guests were having guests.

Cousin Charlie was stationed before the television. "How about giving me a hand with the tree, Charlie?" Mason said, hauling in a huge box of decorations.

"Gosh, I'd like to, Bob," Charlie said, leaning forward and reaching around to touch his back gingerly. "But I've got this sacroiliac thing, you know. Tell you what! I'll see to it your glass doesn't get empty while you're working on the tree. How's that!"

The next evening Mason located his wife. "We're running out of whiskey!" he told her gleefully. "I'll bet my bottom dollar half of this mob pulls up stakes when the booze is gone!"

"You just go right out and buy some more, Robert Mason! Do you think I want them to think we're inhospitable? And be sure to get a bottle of rye. Uncle Elton doesn't drink anything but rye."

"Is that so?" said Mason. "Then I'll have to congratulate him on his wonderful acting ability! I've

never had a drop of rye in this house and I could swear Elton's been stoned for a week!"

But the real trouble set in Christmas morning. Elinor, apparently thinking the Christmas spirit might mollify him, told Mason that her artist boyfriend had wrecked the Thunderbird bringing her home from a party. She told him as he waited in line outside the dining room for the second breakfast shift to finish.

Uncle Elton and Cousin Lester got into a fight over which one of them had the next turn running little Bobby Jr.'s new electric train.

At eleven o'clock, purely in self defense, Mason poured himself a half a glass of straight Scotch whiskey in a desperate effort to prepare himself for the remainder of the long day.

"We're out of whiskey again," Betty said, taking the glass from his hand an giving it to Aunt Emma, who titillated gratefully as she gulped it down.

ROBERT MASON'S left leg had begun to cramp and he shifted his body and stretched the leg. He picked up the paper again and turned the page, glancing without interest at the after-Christmas sales.

And then he saw it, and the delight he felt at seeing his name in print was only slightly dampened by the fact that it was on the second page and not the first.

He folded the paper, adjusted his glasses again, and began to read.

Shooting Melee Mars Yule Gathering. Robert W. Mason, 34, of a Robin Hood Dell address, apparently went berserk late Christmas afternoon and discharged his automatic shotgun repeatedly into a group of relatives who were visiting his fashionable home. Seventeen guests were treated for superficial gunshot wounds at City Hospital and released. Medical authorities were quoted as saying Mason apparently loaded the shells with salt, which would cause painful though not serious wounds and then made sure . . .

"Mason?"

He looked up from the paper, his inner satisfaction glowing in his face.

The jailer shifted the tray to one hand and unlocked the cell door. "Me and the boys pitched in and got you a steak, Mr. Mason." He put the tray on Mason's lap. "And a fifty-cent cigar. We was hoping you'd tell us about it again after you eat. Just the way it happened, you know," the jailer said, grinning with admiration.

(Continued from other side)

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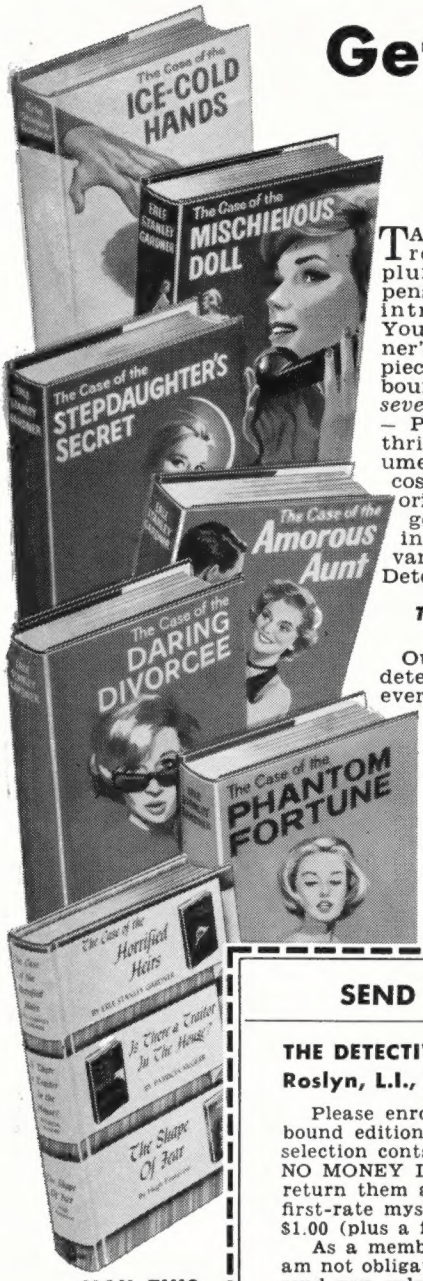
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